

THE FUGITIVE

This novel is very different from Pierre Gascar's earlier work. In *The Seed* and *The Coral Barrier* he worked within a small canvas, but now he has tackled a major theme on a large scale.

Just before the end of the Second World War Paul, an escaped French prisoner of war, is on the run in the German forests of Franconia. He is found by Lena, who shelters him in the great barn of her Nazi father's stud farm. The father flees before the advancing allies and the armies roll by, leaving the farm untouched. Paul and the girl are alone together in the strange vacuum which follows the end of hostilities. Paul has escaped not only from the war but also from the complications of the ensuing peace: he has shed his past and must build his future from scratch.

An idyllic, irresponsible love affair develops into a humdrum marriage, and it begins to look as though the French 'outsider' will be transformed into a German landowner. But Lena's father comes back, bringing with him the aspects of German life against which Paul fought in the war. Paul becomes a fugitive again—a fugitive and at the same time a hunter, because throughout his many adventures he is in pursuit of the meaningful life of which he dreams. The book ends tragically.

There has been no more subtle study of Germany in defeat than this novel, and no more ironic comment on the 'freedom' of her vanquishers.

By the same author

BEASTS AND MEN
THE SEED
THE CORAL BARRIER

PIERRE GASCAR

The Fugitive

Translated by

MERLOYD LAWRENCE



ANDRE DEUTSCH

He noticed that, for some time now, he had not passed any streams. During the morning he had forded several, or crossed here and there over a small stone bridge once built for carts. The water, flowing through the forest in which the sun shone in wide rays through the almost leafless trees, had sustained the high pitch of his happiness.

But towards the beginning of the afternoon, as weariness set in, his happiness grew more subdued. The woods were fewer and farther between. They were now no more than large thickets, choked with brambles, in the midst of wheatfields. Thin shrubs, barely tall enough to hide a man, grew one next to the other, making walking difficult. But perilous as they were, these refuges, in which the dead winter leaves covering the ground rustled now and then, breaking the silence, allowed Paul to give himself a moment's respite. Crossing the endless fields, he had felt naked, as though under scrutiny. The furrowed land made his steps awkward. His haste became all the more apparent; his stumbling, among the clods of earth, betrayed flight, escape.

Sometimes, from quite far off, a man would watch him, without moving, and Paul would look away, as though, by feigning indifference, he were able to make his presence in the middle of the field and his swift pace seem perfectly natural. Then he would feel the man's gaze following him, as though he were attached to a rope which, once he had used up all the slack, would suddenly tighten and hold him fast. There would be an alarm, a summons, or perhaps a rifle shot. The edge of the little

grove was still far off, the earth beneath Paul's feet more unsteady than ever. As he walked, his shoulders swayed markedly; he realized that he must look wretched. At last he reached the trees. The man had not cried out.

Since there were no streams and the spring had been particularly dry, the only vegetation between the trees was grey and crackling, mingled with deadwood. The sky was overcast. The sound of twigs snapping beneath his feet, the rasp of brambles as they scratched his clothes made Paul unable to hear the man who, back there in the fields, had perhaps started to call out, or the footsteps of someone who was perhaps approaching behind the trees. The threat hung on, larger now than before, when it had a face, the face of the old peasant twisted by uncertainty.

Now and then Paul would stop and look around, quickly reassured by the silence, lingering to examine the shiny leaves of a bush whose name he sought in vain to remember. He rested for a moment, in a kind of stupor. Franconia . . . Was he there already? He did not know exactly how far it extended, nor was he very sure where his flight westward had taken him.

Premature or not, the word 'Franconia' gave off a special aura. Certain colours remained associated with it: green a bit lighter than that of the leaves on the bush, in a print showing a hunter near a rustic house, a long time ago, when Paul was still a child. In spite of the reputation which History was giving it, Germany had long been no more than these narrow valleys where pine trees cluster, where smoke rises from wooden houses with garlanded balconies, where the seasons have a clarity to be found only in fairy tales: snowy winters, dazzling springs, with brooks sparkling and waterfalls rushing between the trees. In the first hours of his flight, these pictures had come back into Paul's mind and his freedom had been

brightened by them. He was escaping from the war, from the landscapes altered by it, from the static light of fear. He was escaping the Germany of today, and going back to the one which, through all the battles and the horror, was secretly pursuing its dream of rushing springs. But now the illusion which the forests had brought him for one brief moment had faded, now his freedom was growing old.

Beyond each little wood lay another open space, somewhat darker than the last, for the day was drawing to a close. Paul said to himself that it was already impossible, from a short distance away, to recognize his uniform. Had it been recognized earlier? Five years had multiplied the varieties of military dress, that of Germans, of their allies, of their prisoners, to such an extent that no one was able to distinguish the men on his own side any longer. And with the fronts breaking up everywhere, the retreat of armies from distant battlefields added to the confusion. Nevertheless, Paul could not help but arouse suspicion; he was dressed as a soldier, and his solitude alone suggested wrongdoing.

Civilian clothes would have made his flight easier. He could have followed the roads. But then he would not have known the sense of primordial liberty, the happiness which he had experienced that morning, in the forest which had suddenly emerged straight, tall, and brightly lit from his memory, and not only from his own, but from the memories which were being awakened at this moment, in thousands of men, by the sadness of dying.

Had the lame man perhaps seen this final light, this last image from the depths of childhood, had he too known the memory of that remote happiness one had always intended to try to recapture? But no, he was not going to die. His fingers moved slightly, on the floor. Soon he

would probably open his eyes. . . . With the stick in his hand, still feeling the vibration which had pulsed in his palm after he had struck, Paul saw, on the bald skull of the prostrate man, a thin stream of blood trickling from a large ridge which was already purplish and streaked by the uneven gash of the wound.

The lame man still did not open his eyes but one could see that it was merely stubbornness, a desire to make trouble for Paul; behind his impassive countenance probably lay some sinister intention. The blood that was running slowly behind his ear was a sign of deceit, a deliberate attempt to provide material evidence, like women who know the power of a silent reproach and can shed tears at will, without crying out or sobbing. Paul had dropped his stick and fled.

As an interpreter, and trusty, in a group of French prisoners of war who were employed in the town, he was free to go out of the barbed wire enclosure and wander alone in the streets. At that hour of the morning the small camp was deserted. Three hours would go by before the lame man was found and anyone was sent out in pursuit of Paul. When the last houses of the town were behind him, he had cut across the fields, towards the west. On the horizon was the beginning of a forest. It was then that a sense of peace had begun to come back to him, as though, once inside the forest, Paul had put himself out of reach of the town, out of reach of the war.

Nothing would be the same, ever again. Just this once chance occurrence had done it, this visit from the lame man and the sudden violence of their quarrel. Exempted from military service, the lame man held the office of secretary to the local unit of the national-socialist party. He did his job with a vengeance; the defeat of the country was imminent. He had come to warn Paul that he planned

to register a complaint against two prisoners in the camp. He accused them of having stolen provisions from a warehouse in town. Paul knew that this was the truth, but he accused the man of slander. He hated him. Then the lame man had slapped him.

He was the same height as Paul and had the quick reactions of someone who is compensating for an infirmity. Paul had not had time to parry the blow. Besides, he had never imagined that the man would do such a thing. Nothing in his face suggested brutality. His high forehead, almost entirely bare, his light eyes gave the lame man a kind of nobility. The inflexions of his voice, the way he usually spoke did not take away from this impression. Thus, beneath the slap, Paul felt the smart of contempt twice as hard.

He had taken a couple of steps backwards and his hand had discovered one of the heavy walking-sticks which certain prisoners of peasant origin enjoyed whittling and carving, in their free time, as they reminisced about hedgerows and sorb trees in some isolated corner of France. The lame man had seen Paul seize the stick and had tried to move to the other side of the table. . . . It was just a stroke of fate, this and all that had followed. But, in the pattern of Paul's life, this stroke of fate was like a new lease, a higher bid.

The war was almost over. The only thing Paul and those like him needed now was a reasonable amount of patience. Soon, if one excluded the risks of the final battles in which they might become involved in spite of themselves, they would go back to a liberated France, to their old jobs, their responsibilities. It was only a matter of waiting. Already, Paul's companions, in their dealings with the Germans, were docile and smiling, with a serenity which heralded peace. Their silences could no

longer be put down to nostalgia or despair. They were imagining their return home, with all their relatives assembled, their own house, the work they would take up with an awkwardness that made them laugh in anticipation. They had become 'normal' again.

Paul, too, felt won over by the warmth of this old life whose brightness was already struggling within him, against the shadows of the dark mental world in which he had closed himself for the last few years. His parents were dead; no one was waiting for him in France. He had been the first to forget those who had shown him affection before the war. But that did not matter; he would go home and join in the general rejoicing.

By hitting the lame man over the head—was he alive at this moment?—Paul had somehow found himself again. His will did not seem to be involved since he had yielded to rage, but our essential desires are often there in the shadows, though we are unaware of them. They deflect our actions until an event is set off which satisfies our innermost hopes. Then, in surprise, we look towards the Gods, who exist only in what we dictate to them. So perhaps there had been within him, at the very moment when he was sharing the calm certainty of his fellow prisoners, the unconscious need to plunge back into loneliness, to set himself apart in a different kind of freedom. This freedom had suddenly been given to him. He recognized it by its colour, as he took shelter beneath the trees, the trees of his childhood, those of everyone's childhood, maybe even those of the lame man's childhood, that man who, at the moment of death, behind the walls of his closed eyelids, of his shining skull from which trickled only a residue of blood, had passed on to Paul an invisible image, a mute password which he had not known how to use to advantage.

It was not yet night. Now there was only a kind of wintry dusk, no doubt the result of accumulated clouds. Each time he emerged from the woods, Paul would be met by this interminable half light. Would the fields ever be dark? Fear took hold of him again. He had been walking for more than nine hours. He felt too exhausted to be able to elude any pursuers, and kept repeating to himself that if he fell into the hands of the police he would be shot.

The grey sky, the smell of the earth which rose beneath his steps, his wavering stride, each anticipated the summary execution awaiting him. At least, he imagined, and found in his fatigue a foretaste of the weakness that would make him yield easily to the last rough thrust, the one which would push him against the wall of a firing range. There would be the same smell of earth and a cool wind would make the grass stir at his feet.

He started; someone was calling. A hundred metres behind him, a large man in a black hat was waving a cane and shouting incoherently. He must have just come out of the woods. Paul noticed that he was walking across a field of young wheat. He ran on, reaching fallow land, and continued running. He could hear the man calling him. 'He will go to the nearest village and send out an alert.' Each time one of his feet hit the ground, Paul felt a painful shock in his head. Black spots swam before his eyes. His mouth and his throat were dry. He broke off a blade of grass and began to chew it. He forced himself to breathe deeply. He had reached a downward slope. At the bottom lay a clump of trees.

Once beneath the trees he was surprised by the darkness. By now the evening was probably well along, but dazzled by fear, he had not noticed. The shadows did not make him feel any calmer. The sudden way in which

they engulfed him struck the same ominous note as the smell of earth, the low clouds in the sky, the grasses that had stirred at his feet a little earlier. He kept moving, aware of the finality of each moment he lived through. Just before he died, he would remember this long bough dipping low to the ground and quivering slightly, like the bare branches that reach out, half-submerged, along a river bank, he would remember this white stone lying among the dry leaves, this slanting birch tree a little way ahead.

Everything was ready: suddenly he would feel a hand on his shoulder and someone would lead him away. He walked as fast as he could, too exhausted to run. . . . No, this would not be the scene of his arrest. It lay behind him already. Perhaps this would be the one: trampled ferns, a red mark on a gnarled tree, no doubt destined for the woodpile, a new image which froze before him, larger than life in the weird semi-darkness. Fear brightened reality, and cast these woods—these final woods—into a kind of vivid darkness. Each tree, each bush, each contour of the ground took on sharper outlines, as though already illuminated by the blinding lucidity of death.

The woods came to an end by the side of a road. Paul leapt across it and started into the meadow that covered the opposite slope of the valley. Once again he had to hurry, because the men whom the peasant had surely alerted would soon be coming along the road in a car or on bicycles, to cut off the suspect's retreat. As the front grew closer, each German village had formed its own armed band to track down parachutists or airmen who had been forced to land.

The meadow sloped steeply. Out of breath, his legs dragging, Paul stopped now and then and looked back towards the road. A man went by on a bicycle. Paul could

barely make out his silhouette. At last night was really coming. He felt saved. He started walking again, but more slowly. Soon night was upon him, no longer ambiguous and bristling with spectres of fear as it had been among the trees a few moments before, but bringing back the sense of freedom, of lost innocence, which Paul had felt in the forest at the beginning of his flight.

He was now crossing a plateau and found a dirt road which made his progress easier. He knew, however, that he would not go much further. He fought off a desire to let himself drop to the ground. Hunger, too, made him feel as though he might die. That morning, as he left the town, he had counted on his endurance. The front was hardly more than two hundred kilometres away; he could reach it in four or five days. He would eat wild plants. At night he would light a fire in the woods and cook roots and snails. He had not imagined such great exhaustion; he had not imagined these vast hostile expanses, barren beneath his feet.

Fields and woods extended as far as the eye could see, but it was all dry ground, all scrubby weeds, dead leaves, or bushes. Somewhere, something substantial and edible must be growing, but it remained out of reach, far beyond this bleak vastness in which Paul would never glean more than freedom. He sat down at the edge of a field and began to uproot the rough-leaved plants which grew there. They had only threadlike roots, now and then bearing tiny nodules which burst between his fingers, or else a little bulb which contained nothing but a bit of sticky fluid. The vegetation was almost abstract, surprisingly weightless when it was picked, and to Paul, in this still cool April evening, in his hunger, it seemed as feathery as straw in autumn.

He rose; he could not remain in this open space next

to the road. Weariness, however, prevented him from going any further. Did he not risk losing his sense of direction in the darkness, heading away from the west without knowing it? Find a forest to sleep in. He had to walk a half an hour more before he reached one. A half an hour? His sense of time was growing weaker. He looked at his feet, at a narrow semi-circle of ground before them, as though he were holding a lantern and following the dim glow which encircled his steps.

Ahead of him, nevertheless, the darkness deepened. Paul's eyes began to close and a sudden warning of emptiness, the kind which stops a blind man at the edge of a flight of stairs, held him motionless. He was going to fall. Bottomless depths opened before him and rising from them he felt the coolness of a spring, the stirring of leaves. He opened his eyes and started walking again. Finally he arrived beneath some trees. Leaving the road, he plunged into the forest, his hands held out before him. Soon he sat down against a tree trunk and his head sank against his chest.

2

The sun woke him. It shone on strange brown petals lying in heaps as far as the eye could see, some upright and square like the sails of sampans and ribbed in the same way. A shrill wailing sounded from pulleys—other sails being hoisted no doubt. Paul opened his eyes completely. His face was half buried in the dead leaves. The sun disappeared. It was still night. He rose, shivering. He heard a cry and the sound of something falling. A dog barked. Twenty metres or so from Paul, a light lay shining on the ground. Someone grabbed it and directed the beam into Paul's eyes. He had to squint in the glare.

Nevertheless, behind the electric lantern levelled at him, he could just make out a figure and the whiteness of a face.

‘Don’t move! . . . I have a dog . . .’

Words uttered breathlessly, in fear. It was a woman’s voice. Paul was more surprised than relieved; at no time, since his sudden awakening, had he felt afraid, at no time had he thought of running. Sleep had prepared him for surrender, as though the will to live had been simply a kind of nervousness from which rest had delivered him.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said.

The lantern drew back. The dog, no doubt on a leash, began to whine: the wailing of the pulleys which Paul had heard when he woke up. He remained motionless, steeling himself against the cold which he felt right through him.

‘A French prisoner?’ asked the woman, in a voice that no longer trembled but had a certain hardness.

She had stopped drawing back. Paul nodded.

‘Escaped.’

Unconsciously, he had answered in a tone of mournful observation, as though escape, far from being a deliberate decision, had been a natural consequence, and in his case an aggravation, of captivity.

‘I thought you were dead. The dog found you. I came up to look at you. These days one has to get used to corpses.’

Paul felt ill at ease. He looked at the ground around him.

‘I’ve lost my cap.’

The beam of the lantern was lowered on to the dead leaves. Paul spotted his hat, picked it up and brushed it with the back of his hand. The woman questioned him; already there was less harshness in her voice. What village

in France did he come from? From Paris. Where had he learned to speak German so well? In school and then here. Where was he trying to go? Paul shrugged his shoulders. He put his hat back on and, bending his head to one side in order to escape the blinding glare of the lantern, he tried to make out the woman's face. He guessed that she must be young. She had risen quickly to her feet earlier, after having fallen, probably because of the dog or a branch that had tripped her. Her voice was clear.

'I do know that I can't go much further. I'm exhausted. . . . And then without anything to eat . . .'

He knew he could say this to the young woman. Had she been hostile to him, she would not have questioned him so much. However, he was ashamed of the humble tone of voice in which he had spoken. Slapped the night before, now he found himself whimpering. Before long he would be begging. At the moment when victims of injustice everywhere were beginning to raise their heads, when the victory of their country was about to restore their pride, here he was plunging further into degradation, asking for pity.

'Where have you come from?'

Better not tell her. He named a city to the north. This interrogation did not allow him to regain any dignity, to reveal what he was, what he thought, what he felt. He knew the classics of German literature, German philosophy, German music. He could quote a verse from Goethe or Rilke, a line from Novalis or Hölderlin to fit the present situation, the night, the trees, this face before him, had he been permitted to look at it. He was able to express what was in his mind, what was happening in his country, at that very moment, with a power and precision by which no one could fail to be moved, but he had not been asked.

'The war will soon be over. Why didn't you stay where you were?'

'Impatience. You hold out for five years, then suddenly you can't hold out a month more.'

'It isn't even a matter of months now . . .'

There was a certain bitterness and sarcasm in her voice. The lantern drew back.

'Come back to the road. I know a place where you can sleep.'

The beam of the lantern swung away from Paul. The young woman began to walk, lighting the way ahead of her. Paul followed. In the diffused glow which spread out around the lantern, a thin silhouette stood out. A red-haired dog, of no particular breed, was tugging on a leash. The road was barely a hundred metres away. There the night grew brighter. The young woman switched off the lantern and turned to Paul.

'If someone comes towards us, hide in the woods.'

Paul could see her better. Not more than twenty, probably. Perhaps she was pretty, but, besides the semi-darkness that clouded her face, the events of that night lent a quality of abstraction to it, as though the more violent moments of life make us insensitive to beauty and turn those around us into mere symbols of danger or security. Paul began to walk alongside the girl, he limped a little and felt ashamed of it.

'Where are we?'

'I would rather you didn't know.'

The road through the woods came out into a large meadow enclosed by a fence. A gate, painted white, lay across the road. It was not bolted. The girl pushed it open and, after they had passed through, locked it behind her. Once within the enclosure, she left the road and began walking close to the fence where the shadows were

deeper because of the trees. The meadow grew wider. Paul struggled along. The fence, made of concrete posts with barbed wire stretched in between, was more than two metres high. Once again he felt like a prisoner. What if a man or several men should suddenly bear down upon him?

‘What were you doing in the woods at this hour? A young girl like you . . .’

She reached into the pocket of the heavy jacket she was wearing and held out something to Paul.

‘This.’

He reached for it and, without meaning to, touched the girl’s hand. She pulled it back very quickly and gave a rather nasal little laugh. Just then Paul felt a metal wire tighten around his wrist. Startled, he pulled his arm back towards his body. The wire began to dig into his flesh. He then let his hand go back towards the girl’s and with the other tried nervously to unfasten the metal which held him bound. A snare. He did not know the word for it in German. He said ‘to trap animals’. He felt unhappy and disturbed. Mere, at this hour of the night, with the threat that hung over him, with the girl’s strange complicity, this game had an absurd, childish quality. At the same time it suggested a design which Paul could not quite fathom, but the nature of which he could imagine and which gave him a feeling of uneasiness. He looked at the girl. She put the snare back in her pocket.

‘A wartime measure. There is a shortage of meat. . . . Now we mustn’t talk any more,’ she added in a low voice.

Paul could make out the outline of a tall dark building looking over the meadow, the rest of which remained invisible. The girl carefully rounded the corner of the building and beckoned Paul to follow her. He saw a long series of doors and windows. Some had the shutters closed and wisps of straw or hay protruded through the

cracks. Beyond, on the other side of a large open space, he made out the square shadow of a house, with a thin ray of light outlining some loosely-pulled curtains on the second floor.

The girl pushed open a door and lit the lantern again. Its beam, cast in every direction, as though she wanted to make sure that no one was there, revealed a vast hall without a ceiling, in which, as in the nave of a chapel, windows framing small squares of the night sky rose in tiers all the way to the intersection of the rafters. At either end of the room, platforms of different heights, apparently the remains of lofts which had collapsed, projected like balconies. They broke off abruptly in mid-air. At the edge, stripped of the wooden flooring, extended two or three of the girders which supported them.

Against the very light walls, probably whitewashed, objects of various shapes hung at arm's length, sometimes a bit higher. When the beam of the lantern fell upon them, they turned out to be harness, whips, stable and carriage equipment, but in the darkness they looked like shields, masks, chariot wheels, and bows, the armour and trappings of a bygone age.

The girl made her way towards a door which opened beneath one of the jutting platforms and shone her lantern along a narrow corridor lined with empty stalls. A stairway began in this corridor and led to what was left of the upper floors. The girl and Paul stopped at the first one. It was crowded with hay, sacks and old crates. Here too, harness hung on the wall, grey with dust. The girl led Paul to the window. It looked out over the woods.

'If anything happens, jump through here. . . . There are even some ropes. You can rest now. I'll get you something to eat.'

The red-haired dog whined again, and tugged at the

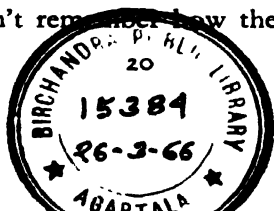
leash, pointing towards the recess under the stairs. The girl let him go and made a clacking sound with her tongue. The dog leapt forward. One could hear him knocking things over. His claws scraped against the floor. He struggled for a few moments in the shadows and then there was a sharp squeal. The girl held up the lantern. The dog came back holding a rat between its teeth. He dropped it. The rat's paws stirred feebly. With one kick, the girl sent it over the edge of the platform into the big hall. She then started down the stairs. Paul stood without moving, watching her go out of the door and into the night.

A moment later he looked back at the little dark spot which the rat made against the uneven flagstones of the hall. The clouds had probably lifted, for a little more light was coming through the windows. It was not enough, however, for Paul to be able to make out whether the rat was still moving its paws. But then, how can one look into a death agony? Night within night. Life recedes behind the lids, behind the membranes of the eye, it disappears beyond the sluice gates of the blood, leaving an ambiguous, taut silence. . . . The lame man was there in the rat. His limp had daemonic associations ('Why does the fellow hobble about on one foot?') and, just as in dreams, he reverted to his original form, growing smaller, soon becoming no more than a small hairy thing, a fat, rather furry insect palpitating on the floor of the barn.

Below, the door opened again. The lantern flashed on Paul. He was still standing there, almost at the edge of the platform. He could not yet see the young girl but recognized the dog who had moved into the light at the end of his leash. The girl had stopped.

'Well, what are you doing, standing there like that?'

He wanted to answer. He couldn't find any words, or rather, he couldn't remember how the passage went in



Faust: 'Why does the fellow hobble about on one foot?' His lips moved slightly. He waited. Was the rat dead? The dog had passed by it without paying any attention. The girl came up the stairs. Once again, that cruel glare, upon him.

'Lie down! You're shaking from head to foot.'

She spread out the mound of hay. A silvery dust rose in the beam of the lantern. Paul sat down in the hay, awkwardly. He felt as though he were drunk. He put his hand in front of his eyes. The lantern was set down and lay glowing in the hay, behind a web of yellow, like the sun behind meadowgrass, when one is lying down on a summer day. He let himself fall back and closed his eyes. A hand was laid on his brow.

'You have a fever. Do you want to eat?'

He shook his head, made himself open his eyes.

'A drink.'

She poured some wine into a glass and handed it to him. He sat up and drank it. Then he lay down again in the hay, his eyes half closed. A sharp pain throbbed at his temples. 'I should take her hand . . .' He was still lucid enough to think that this was the appropriate gesture, under the circumstances, but already a violent need replaced this cold calculation, this concern over what was proper: 'I want to take her hand.' He reached out. His fingers touched only dry grasses mixed with thorns and fuzzy leaves, grasses which he kept gathering up beneath him, all night, endlessly, in a kind of convulsive, clutching motion, sleeping, waking, going back to sleep, always aware that the girl was gone, that he was alone, somewhere in the darkness, between the lame man and the mountains of Franconia.

When he woke, it was broad daylight. He felt rested.

Only his throat was sore. Not so sore, however, that he could not swallow the food which the girl had left near him. When he became more alert, he stopped eating and started looking around for a rope with which to climb quickly out of the window if someone came into the barn. He did not find one and settled for some of the harness which hung on the wall, stiff, scaly halters which he fastened end to end and attached to the window handle. Then he started eating again.

He kept his eyes fixed on the door of the large hall. On either side of it heavy collars for draught horses were hung on wooden pegs. The leather bore streaks of dried white foam, and was shiny from wear. The collars evoked a feeling of constraint, endured for a long time, in sweat and dull pain, like the orthopaedic appliances, braces or leather-covered crutches, also stained, which are hung beneath the vaulted ceilings of churches by those who have been miraculously cured. What had become of the horses, the army of horses who had been set free and whose harness had all been left behind, who had escaped the whips, also hanging against the wall, their lashes wound 'around handles of yellowed cane? What had become of all the horses who had been freed even of their shoes, which were now nailed against the wall according to size, spread out in the shape of another giant horseshoe, a kind of arab doorway?

Paul heard the sound of a key and saw the latch move. He threw himself upon the floor, ready to crawl to the window, without being seen. The girl came into the barn with the dog. She bolted the door behind her and looked up towards the loft where Paul lay. He stood up and said 'Good morning' to the girl. She did not answer but started up the stairs. As she came near him, Paul felt slightly embarrassed. He was dirty, shaggy, unshaven.

She wore a light dress. Her brown hair was pulled back and twisted into a chignon. She wore no make-up; with such high colouring it was hardly necessary. The very image of health, of Germanic wholesomeness.

Paul felt a pang of irritation. There was not a line, not a circle, not a shadow on the surface of this face and this body to suggest the presence of doubt, withdrawal, insomnia, or truth. It probably would not take very much, a well-planned humiliation, an exhausting journey, hunger, or thirst, to break through this fresh morning lacquer. It probably would not take more than . . . Paul saw clearly what was bothering him. His determination to make the girl give herself away had kindled something within him.

She asked, rather dryly, how he felt. He decided to lie. He said that he felt weak, that his throat was very sore.

'It didn't hurt your appetite.'

He did not know what to say.

' . . . You should turn yourself in. They would put you in a hospital. In a few days you would be liberated. The news is very bad this morning. Good, that is, for you.'

'I don't want to turn myself in.' All of a sudden he felt furious. He started towards the window. Then he turned back.

'But if you find it simpler to inform on me . . .'

He looked straight into her eyes. She stared back for a long time, without flinching. Finally she looked down and handed Paul the small cloth bag which she was carrying.

'You'll need these to wash with.'

Her voice was not so hard as a moment before and Paul began to hope that the girl would not denounce him. She was staring at the window. Paul opened the bag and took out a towel, soap, and a razor. The girl turned halfway around.

'It was my brother's razor.'

'Your brother . . .'

'Killed in action at Smolensk, the winter of '41 . . .'

She looked back at the window. Some trees with young leaves stirred, quite close by. Soon, smoke would begin rising behind these trees, there would be a roar in the sky, as though walls were crumbling in the distance: the war, moving onwards, through woods and fields, breaking into the zones of silence. . . . The girl interrupted his reverie.

'Come with me. I'll show you where the water is.'

She went down the stairs ahead of Paul and, turning her back into the main part of the barn, she started down a corridor. In the stalls along the way, lit by small dormer windows, hung more harness. At the far end the corridor was closed off by a door. Paul heard dull thuds, chains jangling. The horses. He asked how many there were.

'Only twelve now. . . . Be quiet. Someone could hear you. They are taking care of the horses. Even though this door is sealed off . . .'

She had just pushed open another door, to the side, leading into a little room with a cement floor, where a few taps stuck out above old zinc tubs. A few panes were missing from the window and in the corners of the room dead leaves from the autumn before still clung to spider webs amidst the peeling plaster. Here too, in this deserted spot, the horses kept pounding like a sporadic but powerful pulse. Now and then one could hear the sound of a chain, rattling endlessly against a manger, in the night. In the night because on the other side of the wall everything was darkness, warmth, security, even though here, daylight reigned. On the other side of the wall lay the blind, closed world of the mingled horses, while on this side, springtime, and strangers moved about in a cold, even light.

'I'll leave you now. Don't linger here.'

Paul spent a long time washing, in spite of what she had said. The cold water brought back his strength. He was no longer afraid that someone would appear; he was washing away his fears. Next to him, he could still hear the horses stamping about. They revived the enticements of the darkness to which he already knew he would yield. It would be possible to deny everything: the war, the daylight, the coming victory and France, if only he could make his way, eyes closed, body to body, into the dark tide which beat on all sides against this dilapidated building, not twelve horses, but a thousand, all those who had abandoned their harness and who, having returned from the miraculous fields, moved slowly and urgently, one against the other, behind every wall . . .

When he went back up to the gallery, Paul was surprised not to find the girl. He no longer believed that she could betray him. He supposed that certain obligations kept her busy. She would come back. Two hours passed. She did not come back. He began to read in her absence a discreet invitation to leave. To insist upon staying was becoming perverse, even dangerous; it could exhaust her patience.

From the high platform, he looked down, once more, on the dead rat. Everything would start all over again: the monotonous woods, the uniform meadows with grasses stirring and white stones in the furrows, the cold twilights of Franconia, with a peasant running after him, calling out to him, in words he could not understand. But worse than this, worse than any threat, was the oppressive feeling that by leaving he was turning his back on an obscure truth which he already knew to be more important than his freedom or his safety.

He decided to wait until noon. He checked the straps

which he had attached to the window and then, exasperated by the morbid fascination of the rat, he picked up a broken shovel which lay there, went down to scoop up the dead animal, and threw it out of the window. Then he saw her. She was coming out of the woods. Maybe she was spying on him, curious to see what course he would take. She came up and stood under the window.

'Throw me the halters. I can't come in the front way; they are out there; they would see me.'

Paul was afraid that the leather was not strong enough. He leaned out as far as he could. The girl had already begun to climb, leaning on the stones which projected from the wall. Finally she took hold of the halters and then of Paul's wrists. She jumped on to the floor of the gallery. This little adventure amused her. She was laughing. She took two apples out of her pocket and gave one to Paul.

'They're outside. They're looking at the sky in the west, listening. They're deathly afraid.'

Who were these people she was talking about? She named all those who still lived with her in the house: her father, an unmarried uncle, a servant, an old book-keeper. The girl's mother had died two years earlier. Would none of them think of coming into this building? She took a key out of her pocket, threw it into the air and caught it again. It was the only one. Besides no one ever set foot in here any more.

It had been part of the large stud farm which once existed here. The sizeable property, which included woods, pastures, and two remote farms, had been the home of the best stallions in the region, and had also served as a central breeding station. From morning to night there had always been horses coming and going. This building had been used for storage, stables, harness.

On the two upper floors had been rooms for the farmhands and the hay loft. Even before the war, the mechanization of agriculture had reduced the activity of the stud farm. During the early hostilities, the army had planned to make the farm into a remount station for cavalry. They had undertaken various constructions, laid the foundations of another building in the meadow, and had decided to transform this one into a riding school. This explained why the two upper floors had been demolished, in such a way as to leave only a kind of gallery leading along the wall at each level, to hold supplies. Then a counter-order had come, and everything had been abandoned.

The stud farm had grown less and less active. The stable hands and the girl's brother had been drafted. A number of pastures had been given over to crops. There were only a dozen horses left. The family sold the colts and lived off the land the rest of the time. Paul asked the girl what her name was. Lena. What was she doing here? She was waiting. She had a fiancé in the war. She finished eating her apple and threw the core out of the window.

'When are you going?'

Paul hesitated, 'Tomorrow?'

'Fine. Tomorrow.'

It seemed to Paul that these words, his and hers, had a false ring. His tentative answer, as though 'exploring the territory', her studied affirmation, trying to sound reasonable. . . . There was silence. Lena moved towards the window.

'I won't come back until this evening, after dark. Then I'll bring you something to eat.'

She swung her legs over the sill, and with the help of the straps, let herself slide to the ground. Then she walked away, keeping close to the wall, without looking back.

Discouraged by the long hours which he would have to spend alone, Paul tried to give in to sleep. But it would not come. Dozing, Paul now and then half opened his eyes. He could make out, already in shadow, the bridles, blinkers, whips, and halters, which, hung in such an array on the wall, took on an esoteric quality, becoming the trappings of an unknown rite. When he fell asleep completely, he saw himself wrapped with leather straps, some bound in spirals around his bare legs, others crossed over his chest, holding plates, escutcheons of leather; two of the straps, which seemed essential in his dream, were drawn between his thighs and ran along each side of his groin.

These two very taut straps, made of gleaming leather, gave him a sense not only of strength, but also of his own sleekness. Pulling against the buckles, at the level of his hips, he tightened them a little more each time, and accentuated, by a twinge of pain, the vigour rising within him, a vigour now so extreme that it could at any moment explode into a sob.

He opened his eyes again, almost woke, turned over on his stomach and slipped back into the dream. . . . Now, when he touched himself, his body, bound on all sides with leather, seemed leaner, harder. There was no longer anything to fear; he was invulnerable. Once again he felt the pressure of the two straps against his groin, next to the skin. Once again, that joy which came closer but never fully arrived, which was mingled with a vague sense of nausea. . . .

He woke up suddenly. It was almost night. Why did she take so long? What did she mean by 'after dark'? And what if someone prevented her from going out? He rose and began walking back and forth along the gallery. His steps resounded on the floor. When he stopped, Paul

heard little scratching, rustling noises, made by rats as they scampered off. He imagined them lying in wait for him, some in the furrow of darkness along the floor, others perched at the edge of the white oval windows made by the draught collars hung against the wall, in the skein of halters, or in the square black eye of the heads outlined by the bridles, with their blinkers, browbands, and bits.

It was completely dark when the door opened. The beam from the lantern swept along the walls, fell on Paul. Beneath its questioning, imperious rays, he imagined for a moment that he was again bound in a network of leather straps, as in his dream. In that instant, he had the same feeling of happiness. When she arrived near him—why had she brought the dog?—Iena unwrapped a package of food.

‘I had trouble about the bread; we are rationed.’

Paul asked her to share his meal; eating alone made him uncomfortable. She refused and then accepted. There was a whole bottle of wine; the cellar was kept open. As the enemy approached, Iena’s father and uncle were liquidating their reserves. Paul questioned the girl; what had she been doing all afternoon?

She had ironed some clothes, done a little sewing next to the window. What could she see from her window? First the fields, then, beyond the fence and on either side of the road which they had taken the night before, the woods, still black, with new leaves of an intense green on the highest branches: spring against the sky.

A curious emotion came over Paul. There she had been all afternoon, calm, diligent, breathing in the silence behind her window, while he had plunged deeper and deeper into dreams whose meaning he understood all too clearly. He would have liked to be this girl, looking out

over the horizon, living the patient hours of the long afternoon, breathing gently, living the patient hours of the war. A rather conventional image, to be sure, but one which he protected within himself because it distracted him from desire. There was another image of Lena. He had glimpsed it the night before, when she had caught his wrist in the snare; he had sensed it again, fleetingly, that morning, in the girl's overly stiff behaviour, and finally he had recognized it in his sleep that afternoon.

They had finished eating. Lena rose.

'Will you come with me?'

Because of Paul, she had not been able to gather and reset all the snares the night before. A gamekeeper could come by that way in the daytime. She took some coils of metal wire out of her pocket.

'Do you know how to set them?'

He thought he remembered how, from his childhood in the country. He gave a little demonstration, under the beam of the lantern, which appeared to satisfy her.

'I will show you where the holes are. I look for them early in the morning, when the dew on the grass is still white. The hares leave tracks through it.'

They went out very stealthily, although Lena assured him that everyone in the house, including the three men and even the servant, lay in a deep, wine-sodden sleep. They set off along the same road as the night before.

'My father thought he could find some business for his stud farm, by getting involved in politics. He never went beyond a local level, but it was enough to leave him a marked man. He was responsible for anything that took place in this district. He resigned two months ago, but he knows that after we are defeated, there will still be scores to settle. I could be scared myself, and get drunk.'

'Are you patriotic?'

She laughed.

'You would have been in the hands of the police long ago. . . . Maybe you should be,' she continued, after a pause. 'God knows what you've done. No one escapes on the eve of liberation, without having a very good reason.'

Paul did not answer. For the last few minutes they had been walking on the embankment next to the road, in the deeper shadows of the trees. Lena plunged into the woods. She moved quickly, the dog straining ahead of her on the leash. She said nothing. Now and then she turned on the lantern, but she kept the chamber partly shaded with her hand. She ran the light over the tree trunks. She stopped. On one tree, she had broken off a little branch, as a guide.

She found the hole and asked Paul to lay the snare. The noose he made seemed too big to her; they might catch pheasants as well. She knelt down next to Paul; their shoulders touched. The light from the lantern, partly smothered in the brush, glowed on her face, deepening the shadows of her eyes, burnishing the clear outlines of her lips, which were slightly moist and showed an almost imperceptible quiver. She finished tightening the noose and caught Paul looking at her. She smiled, stood up, and they continued their search.

They had already gathered and set several snares when the dog began to whine. Lena leaned over, clasped his nose between her hands, and listened. There was no sound in the woods. She stood up, waved her arm to tell Paul, who stood behind her, to follow, and ran off, drawn by the dog. When Paul caught up with her, she was shining the lantern on a strangled hare. He had pulled very hard against the metal wire; blood darkened the cleft of his lip. Lena opened the noose and laid the hare over her forearm as she reset the trap.

The nimble motion of her hands rocked the dead

animal back and forth. But there was more than this, more than this tender cradling, like a child with a limp, inanimate doll; there was at the same time a precision, an indifference, an indefinable smile on these lips again gleaming in the light, the gestures of a woman throwing a fur-piece over her arm before she starts putting on her gloves.

Paul stood there, watching. For two days now he had gone from blood to more blood, even when it was only a trickle, like this. In the end the stepping-stones were all the same. From one death to the next. Just to find a place to step, one last time, the next to last time—whatever the price. To reach the other shore! What other shore? He was weary, after so many years, of all these discarded bodies, all these deaths which somehow exempted him from his own. . . . He leaned over, picked up the hare by its back legs and said:

‘Let’s go back now.’

For the first time since the night before, he was giving an order, he was asserting his masculine authority. He hardly realized what he was doing and Lena obeyed as naturally as if they had been living as a couple for several weeks. Abruptly, without knowing it, they had crossed the threshold of familiarity. When they spoke to one another, it was no longer a matter of questions and answers, of silences which re-established an infinite distance between them. They were already at the stage of unfinished sentences, thoughts expressed out loud, of casual, almost tacit agreements. Lena stopped to put the snares in her pocket, Paul took the lantern from her and said something, for the first time, to the dog.

However, as they drew closer to the house, another kind of silence deepened between them, as though they had both become conscious of some inevitable continua-

tion of their understanding. By saying, 'Let's go back now,' at a certain moment during their walk, in such a composed tone of voice, as calmly as he would have if he had said the same thing every evening for a long time, Paul was unconsciously suggesting a return to a place they had in common, where the harmony between them would continue, closer perhaps, sheltered in any case from the alarming shadows of the forest, from the wind that now grew colder. Lena rose and followed him, thus strengthening, by her obedience which gave all the signs of simple, everyday contentment, the impression that they were returning together to a familiar refuge.

Paul felt a growing anxiety. The silence between Lena and himself persisted, becoming more and more obvious, more and more difficult to break. When she started to open the large gate leading into the meadow, which she had locked on their way out, Lena fumbled nervously before she succeeded in turning the key. Instead of helping her, Paul stood there motionless. They walked along close to the fence, and arrived at the door of the building.

'I'll come in to light the way for you.'

Lena's voice was completely calm, expressing nothing more than a rather matter-of-fact politeness. Paul was disturbed; something told him, however, that he had not been mistaken earlier, about the reasons for the silence between them. She walked towards the corridor.

'Now that I think of it, there is a little room at the back with an old cot in it, which used to be the caretaker's, but it would be dangerous for you to sleep there. If someone took the key from me, and came over here, you would not have time to escape.'

She went up the stairs. She had let go of the dog, who was sniffing about below in the hall. She shone the lantern on the pile of hay. Paul remained behind her. He had

thrown the dead hare on a crate. Lena turned around. The beam of the lantern played across Paul's chest. He stepped forward. The beam was lowered. This he took as consent. He placed both hands on Lena's shoulders and heard her quick breathing. His hands rose to clasp the nape of the girl's neck. Then Paul pressed his mouth to hers. She kept her lips closed and before long he released his embrace. Lena went towards the stairs.

'Wait a minute; I'll put the dog outside . . .'

Paul heard her go downstairs very fast. 'She is going to run off,' he thought. He saw her go across the big hall, open the door into the darkness and call the dog. 'If she goes, I'll leave tonight . . .'

The dog went out and Lena closed the door after him. Paul went down the stairs as fast as he could in the blackness. He approached Lena and drew her to him, once again. She pulled away and took his hand.

She led him along the corridor and, opposite the room where Paul had washed that morning, she pushed open a door. It was the caretaker's room which she had told him about earlier. Inside was a cot, covered with a mattress which was torn open here and there. Paul took off his coat and spread it over the bed while Lena stood motionless, letting the lantern shine on the mattress. There was a loud thumping behind the wall; they were next to the stables. Remembering the dark, vital world of the horses, Paul felt slightly disappointed. He had held in his arms only the inert body of a girl. The coldness of the preparations they were making in this room added to his disenchantment. Nevertheless, she was there, beside him, naked beneath her dress. He drew closer. Before he could make the slightest gesture, she caressed his cheek and pulled away.

'We'll have to light a fire.'

There was a cast iron stove in the room. Thankful for this respite, though he did not admit it to himself, Paul went into the big hall to look for paper, straw, and wood. He had to take the lantern with him, leaving Lena alone in the darkness. In the gallery, he found an empty sack which he filled with broken boards and the ends of rafters which had been piled in the corners of the hall. He started back along the corridor but, all of a sudden, he stopped and put out the lantern.

His eyes shut, he let the night close in upon him. The horses beat against the other side of the wall, in an even rhythm. She was there, very near. She must have heard him come back and then stop but she said nothing; she did not move. While he, Paul, holding his hand to his brow, tried to get his bearings, to orient himself before going any further, before passing this ridge beyond which he knew that victory, France, all those thousands of familiar faces smiling at the same time, like a photograph of a grandstand after a goal has been scored, would be slowly extinguished.

It would happen smoothly, in the same way that, from the crest of a mountain, the light and the murmur of a valley still in sunlight behind one grow dimmer and dimmer as one starts down the opposite side, already plunged into shadow, touching strange plants with one's fingertips. It was because of the total darkness, the night which he had drawn around him, that he was able to see this, to read it, to understand it, for destiny does not show by day; it is blurred, erased, by any gleam of light. It is made of the same blackness, the same substance, the same blood as death. . . . He turned on the lantern, started walking, and went into the room.

Lena was sitting on the bed. She seemed anxious but she quickly pulled herself together and took a childish

pleasure in lighting the stove. It began by emitting dense clouds of smoke. They coughed, their eyes smarted.

‘For God’s sake, get the rest of the wine!’

When he came back the stove was drawing well. The heat had already begun to spread through the room. Lena drank two glasses of wine, one after the other. She began to walk back and forth, while Paul stuffed fuel into the stove.

‘Tell me about yourself . . .’

There was something premature about this which surprised and irritated Paul. He shrugged his shoulders; there wasn’t much to tell. He had no trade yet, no close relatives, he had been a soldier for eight years. . . . He drank the rest of the wine, put the bottle aside and turned around. Lena was taking off her blouse and skirt. He went towards her, kissed her. She opened her lips. While holding her in his arms he searched along her back, beneath the lace edge of her slip for the hook of her brassiere. He had to use both hands to loosen it. Lena held herself slightly arched. Would she submit? He drew away from her and went to put out the lantern which was still sitting on the bed. From the little door in the base of the stove shone a flickering golden light, brightening when the embers crumbled or when a splinter of wood caught fire in front of the grate.

Paul came back to Lena. A moment later he moved away again. The stove was drawing too fiercely; the base of the chimney pipe was nearly incandescent. Paul half closed the little door. The room was now almost in darkness. There was only a flickering glow on the floor and against the wall next to the horses. Paul drew close to Lena who was still standing. They had taken off nearly all their clothes. They hesitated to lie down on this doubtful bed, and with slow gestures which now and

then made shadows stir on the wall, they caressed one another, standing there, angular as trees.

3

Although his eyes were closed and he was breathing quietly against Lena's bare shoulder, beneath the edge of a coat, in the kind of semi-asphyxia in which animals sleep, although he felt within him a sensation of having finally attained the night, his own absolute night, subterranean yet alive, the night which every creature seeks so desperately through the light of day, Paul remained lucid.

And this clairvoyance, which perhaps owed something to the extraordinary calm of his body, gave him a certain detachment. Lena, in utter abandon, lay heavily against Paul's mouth and as his lips stirred now and then in a kind of mute murmur, he fed greedily upon her. But at the same time, his mind drew him beyond this darkness. He was walking along a dirt road, crossing through a forest, running towards a sunlit glade. He felt the same impulse to escape, but now free of fear, which had brought him this far, and with it the hidden momentum of love which, though we fail to recognize it, frees us more than it ties us down.

Someone started to talk very loud in the stable next to them, and then, immediately, several men raised their voices. Paul, who was not as lucid as he had thought, could make out only the word 'horse', a word which, in German, stumbles against the tongue, like a dry stutter. He sat up very suddenly. Lena had done the same. They were not asleep and now, on the other slope of that love which had left them one against the other a moment earlier, they discovered that consciousness is a slight

betrayal. They were still alert, in the bosom of the night which even at its darkest will sometimes betray the glance of an embracing lover, white and awry, like the eye of a horse.

'The lantern!' whispered Lena.

Paul could not find it and searched about, amused by his gropings. He said to himself that, in the long run, he had nothing to lose. In life, there had to be a moment when this at last became true! He would put his arm around Lena's body, let himself fall back, drawing her with him. Afterwards, men would arrive, holding lanterns. They would have to cut this knot, disentangle this nest of eels. He stretched out his arm, already feeling more determination than desire. Lena slipped away. She leapt off the bed and started to rearrange her clothes in the darkness. Paul let his arm fall back and felt the lantern buried in the folds of the coat. He turned it on. On the other side of the wall, the voices were growing louder and louder:

'That's 'idiotic; it's anarchy!' cried someone. 'Do you understand? As long as you refuse to show me the official orders, I won't give them to you!'

'My father,' said Lena, who was almost dressed. 'They want to take away the horses. I don't understand.'

'I have full authority and you know it as well as I do. There's been a general ordinance,' replied a man with a curt voice to Lena's father. 'Don't worry, you'll get your horses back! Or would you rather save them for the Americans or the Russians!'

'I won't allow you to insult me!' cried Lena's father.

There was a clamour of voices. Someone said 'for the good of the country . . .' Paul could not understand the rest. He had got out of bed. Fear again took hold of him, and a kind of hatred which did not spare Lena, who

was now suddenly, in some way, incriminated by these voices in the night, by all this strife among Germans, by the horses. He put on his shoes and picked up his coat, still warm from their bodies. Lena, already dressed, held the lantern and stood waiting for Paul to gather his belongings. She could not hide her impatience and kept turning her head towards the corridor, where, from behind the thin, boarded-up door that led to the stables, the voices could be heard more clearly.

‘One day you’ll pay for this, Otto! Some day we’ll meet again. . . . Coming in here in the middle of the night, like thieves . . .’

‘We saw smoke coming out of the chimney. So we thought we wouldn’t be disturbing you,’ said another man in an appealing tone of voice.

‘Oh come on now, Brücker!’ cried Lena’s father. ‘Don’t try to lie your way out of this! Though it hardly matters; I never would have thought you capable of taking orders from a profiteer!’

‘A profiteer! Be careful, Wittgenstein. You may have to pay dearly for those words some day. More dearly than for your horses . . .’ continued the one who sounded like the leader of the little band. ‘You are insulting our uniform.’

‘Your disguise, you mean!’ retorted Lena’s father.

Another outburst of voices.

‘Quiet! Don’t let’s waste our time arguing with him,’ ordered the one called Otto. ‘I’ll report all this to the proper authorities.’

From then on one could hear only the men asking about the harness and shouting orders about the horses which were being led out. Lena turned to Paul.

‘They might break in the door to get in here for the harness. Hurry up!’

Again the dry voice of their first meeting. Paul and Lena went along the corridor and up the stairs to the gallery. Lena grabbed the straps which hung in the window and climbed over the sill. She would go to her father, find out what was going on, and keep the men from coming into this part of the building. Paul would stay by the window, so as to be able to escape if they came near. Then he would wait for Lena in the woods.

She let herself slip to the ground and ran off. From the gallery, one could not hear the voices and the noise in the stable. Paul felt a painful sense of exclusion. Once again he was relegated to his bed of straw, and his solitude became more and more like forced confinement. There was now nothing ambiguous about it. He was fed, visited for love, and then when the moment of pleasure had passed, the doors were closed upon him and he had to remain there among the harness, condemned to the same patient endurance as the animals who moved about slowly at the other end of the building, amidst close, heavy smells.

He decided to go out through the window. By keeping at a distance, unseen thanks to the darkness, he would be able to watch what was going on and especially to see how Lena behaved, outside his company. He knew that he had not yet tamed her, that she escaped him, that once she was away from him she might speak in a different tone of voice, with other words, other intonations, that she might become German again, stiff, in the chill wind, glib, treacherous.

He knew that she could, perfectly naturally, and without any desire to do harm, betray him, collaborate in his undoing, in spite of all promises, in spite of love, simply because that was the way it was, because Germany was always there; one had only to look around to find it again,

with its black woods, its green fields, and, behind the hills, its regiments arriving in a stream of flags.

He set foot on the ground. Once again he was free. He wondered whether to plunge into the forest and start walking. There was still time. And the night was ripe for it. Not so dark as it had seemed at first. Aeroplanes droned against the sky. A barely perceptible murmur rose from the horizon to the west. Horses—now he could hear them again—circled angrily around the wrists which held their bits high in the air. Everything stirred, came to life, sparkled; the early leaves, the wall, and the tree trunks stood out more clearly, and the horses, just a few feet away in the courtyard, how they must be gleaming!

Germany was no longer asleep. Victory loomed like a forest fire whose glow, still faint because of the distance, kept the trees and the horses in an endless vigil, outlined the wide square of the stableyard, silhouetted groves of trees, each blade of grass, made dogs all over the countryside bay, their forefeet spread apart, no longer at the moon, but at the first scent of blood. . . . Yes, there was still time to leave; but he was not leaving.

With the wall close on his left, he crept to the corner of the building, beyond which lay the space separating the house from the former stud farm. It was closed off on this side by the fence. In the middle of the yard the men had almost finished rounding up the horses. Paul leaned against the cast-iron drainpipe leading down from the roof. No one could see him and, in any case, he would have plenty of time to escape.

'Listen, Otto! I'm not being mercenary, I swear. . . . These two horses, this one and that one. . . . You have no idea . . .'

'Don't go on like that,' cried Lena. 'You're making a fool of yourself!'

Paul could not tell where she was. All he could see was a confused mingling of human forms and the flanks of horses. The red-haired dog came close. Paul stroked him. What if he started barking? No, he would not bark. They were no longer strangers and this comforted Paul.

‘What about you, Fritz? You’re almost a member of the family. You must understand how I feel!’

It was still Lena’s father talking. He seemed in a state of extreme agitation. He must have been going from one man to another, for Paul heard his voice from a different direction each time. The horses’ shoes slipped endlessly on the cobblestones. ‘And I’ve just made love with his daughter . . .’ The drainpipe was damp and jagged. Paul laid his temple against it.

‘Fritz, please, you at least should stand up for me!’

Paul did not hear Fritz’ answer. Besides, what did it matter to him? He was a stranger. An enemy, in fact. Even more than that, he was a creature without ties, without loyalties, without even those conferred by captivity, by hatred, a man bereft of everything. Standing here with his feet in a bed of nettles and his head against a drainpipe, he was living one of the ironies of history, one of its little jokes: Germany was no more than this quarrel over horses, this quarrel of Kurdish nomads.

Now the horses were being led away. The men were taking them to the other side of the house, towards the wooded hill which Paul could make out in the night, the night that was perhaps a little darker than a few moments before. The horses neighed now and then, pawing the ground or stumbling in the road, and Paul suddenly felt something missing inside of him.

‘Otto, I beg you. At least the two I told you about, at least those two!’

The voice came from far away. Lena’s father must have

been running after the group of men and animals. Paul looked around for Lena and took a few steps forward. The space between the house and the stables seemed empty. Paul could hear the neighing of the horses growing fainter and fainter; everything around him seemed cold and lifeless. Beyond, in the distance, the horses must have been climbing a steep path; the yelling of the men and the neighing of the horses, ever less distinct, sounded from a great height, and ended by becoming a lament: the dying clamour of a battle under the open sky, with men and horses heaped upon one another or scattered far apart, with nothing left of the fury but these cries which rang with an infinite anguish.

Then the sounds faded away, towards the hilltop. Someone walked slowly into the courtyard and Paul had to step back. A door opened, with a creak. A muffled voice sounded: 'The dogs!' What dogs? The courtyard fell silent again and Paul went back to the window where the straps were hanging. Everything was calm. He hoisted himself against the wall, less easily than Lena—the clumsy lover. He swung into the gallery. Suddenly he again became aware of the designs made by the harness against the walls, slightly illumined by their whiteness, effigies of a sepulchre now that the horses had gone, had died, now that silence filled the stables, now that the rats, freed from oppression, ran everywhere.

Why didn't Lena come back? Earlier, he thought he had torn himself away from her, he thought he could disappear into the forest, and now he found himself entirely dependent upon this girl. From now on she alone could make up for the emptiness that was spreading all around him, with the departure of the horses, the return of silence, the increasing darkness of the night. She alone could fill the vacuum which the victorious armies were

leaving in their wake, and which peace, and his return to France, held in store for him.

What if Lena had been taken away by the men? Paul had not been able to make out who they were. They were armed, but nothing in their conversation, in the orders they gave one another, suggested military behaviour, the hierarchy of rank. Lena's father called them by their first names. Were they part of a local political group, a rebel party? Was Germany, weary of fighting and tyranny, revolting from within? This thought excited him and made him forget his loneliness. He was fond enough of the country, in spite of everything he had suffered there, to hope that it might redeem itself in such a way. Then the emptiness which the future held for him would disappear, for Paul realized that what he had always expected from victory was a promise of higher stakes.

He was sitting next to the window, his head in his hands, now listening for sounds from the woods, now continuing his dream of revolt, wondering again and again what could have happened to Lena. The cold wrenched him from the drowsy stupor into which he had finally slipped. The sky grew lighter. Where was she? He had begun to walk back and forth, in a state of extreme agitation, when he heard a car engine start up below. It must have been parked between the house and the main barn of the stud farm, in the same place where the men had rounded up the horses.

It was light now, and Paul could not go back to the corner of the building to watch what was going on, as he had done during the night. He remembered a small high window in the little room where he had washed the evening before. It was close to the ceiling, but all he had to do was build a platform to be able to see out. The crates which lay around the gallery did very well. Paul

had to lean his temple against the shattered glass and look sideways to see the car, a rather old model, with a tarnished body. There was no one in it. The motor had been turned off while Paul was moving the crates.

He could now see Lena's house for the first time, a two-storey stone building, without any particular style which must have been built, like the stud farm, in the middle of the last century. Behind it, not very far away, the wooded hill where the horses had been taken rose abruptly and stretched out towards the horizon. On the other side of the large meadow that was fenced in and divided by the road, a foothill, also covered with trees, rose from the woods where Paul and Lena had met. Together, the open meadow and the land where the house and the stud farm stood constituted a single vast clearing. Paul was pleased by this. He felt protected. Only Lena's absence still worried him.

He threw his head back. The door of the house had just opened. On the threshold, a thin man holding two suitcases stood for a moment looking up at the sky before walking towards the car. He loaded in his baggage, went back to the house, and came out again soon after, in the company of another man and an old woman. They all carried suitcases which they appeared to have difficulty in fitting into the trunk and the inside of the car. They were going away. Why didn't Lena appear? Was she even in the house?

Paul felt a sense of discouragement; he was growing weary of his own anxiety. Now, in the morning, in the light of day, in the light of the war, the reasons for it seemed pitifully slight. He had met a girl who was probably bored to death, she had felt sympathy for him, had given herself, without having talked with him very much, in a kind of anonymity. Wartime encouraged these

transitory affairs. But once pleasure had passed, everything came back: fear of death which gave the new day its true light, concern for one's property, one's family, and the urge to flee. He, too, was going to leave. No longer was he afraid of being caught. A few hours earlier he had begun to realize that the war was in its last stages. Far beyond the trees speckled with new leaves, the sky was once again full of vague rumblings. The disappearance of the horses during the night had revealed to Paul that the final upheavals were at hand.

The two men and the old woman got into the car. Paul saw another figure, bareheaded, with short white hair, start to come out of the house and then go back inside, with gestures which conveyed the vehemence of what he was saying. A moment later, the man threw his arms in the air, let them fall, turned on his heels and marched rapidly back to the car. He slammed the door. The engine roared and the car started slowly towards the gate which led to the road. Not until then did Lena appear on the threshold of the empty house.

4

Paul and Lena decided not to stay in the house but to move some furniture to the loft from which they could escape unnoticed, if necessary. Foresight made them do this. When Lena had come back to Paul, she was bursting with news. The Allied troops had penetrated within fifty kilometres to the west and were fanning out to the north. There was fighting in Berlin. The Soviet vanguard had reached the Elbe.

Lena's father, desperate over the loss of his horses, but also liberated by it, for they had kept him from fleeing until now, had left with his brother and hoped to reach

Switzerland where some of his relatives were living. He took with him the two servants who wanted to be left in their own village. In refusing to go with her father, Lena had revealed the hatred which she had been nurturing against him for years. He had realized this and had seen in his daughter's behaviour a desire for revenge: she was staying in the house to show him and everyone else that by leaving he was giving in to cowardice. They had separated with bitter words. Lena had been the one to break off their arguments. She knew he would try to talk about her mother, or her brother who had been killed at the beginning of the eastern campaign. Why couldn't he leave them in peace! There would be enough dead tomorrow, without reviving those of yesterday. The war was taking its course and the high-sounding ideals they were throwing at one another were already posthumous ones. Having said this, Lena had shut herself in the parlour.

She also told Paul about the 'Werewolves' who had come for the horses that night. Like other towns all over Germany, the two nearest ones, Mosfeld and Hirschenberg, had formed a band of snipers armed by the military authorities and the Party. These bands were made up of men whom age had exempted from the draft, but who were still hale enough to take part in delaying and harassing operations. They were not given much encouragement; with defeat imminent, their efforts were only a last resort, a form of revenge, or a demonstration of the imperishable honour of the German people. The time had come for suicide to become a religion.

The partisans who had appeared during the night claimed that the horses would be useful in making a rapid retreat after a raid. Living in the country, most of them could ride. Their leader was a certain Otto Schachen-

mayer, a prominent merchant of Mosfeld, who had replaced Lena's father after he had resigned as head of the local branch of the Party. Schachenmayer had substantial reasons to suspect his predecessor of being an opportunist, strengthened by Lena's father's claim that he was in too poor health to bear arms. This animosity seemed to explain the brutal requisitioning of the horses.

The presence, however, among the partisans of another man named Fritz Haas suggested that Otto Schachenmayer might not be entirely responsible for what had happened. Though he ran one of the two tenant farms on the property, Haas' position was only that of a steward, and he probably harboured a good deal of resentment towards Lena's father. Wittgenstein was a tyrannical man, lacking in kindness. His coarseness in itself was shocking, and seemed to wound Fritz Haas whose unfinished education had included two years in a theological seminary. Lena had known Fritz since childhood and sensed his bitterness. Though he had married (late, it is true, and without having had any children), he was still spiritually-minded in a rather vague and lofty way. Estranged from the church, an apostate, he had nevertheless clung to certain private beliefs of his own, and as he grew older his appearance had begun to take on the rigid bearing and manners of a sexton. A country sexton, with a tan, smooth-shaven face and a fringe of grey hair.

He took no part in politics. His mystical temperament would have made him incompetent, and realizing this, the recruiters for the Party did not solicit his services. Of a retiring nature, he had nevertheless joined willingly when, as a last resort, they had called upon him. Lena thought it quite possible that he had then thought of getting back at Wittgenstein and suggested that the horses on his stud farm be requisitioned. Fritz loved to ride and,

using his duties on the farm as an excuse, the woods on the property being rather extensive, he often succeeded in borrowing a horse from Wittgenstein. He always asked for the same one, and the horse had grown to know him. It was easy enough to imagine that at the hour of danger this faint-hearted man had wanted to have the horse he was fond of with him, to assure him of a swift flight if necessary.

Lena pursued all these speculations with obvious rancour; the 'theft' of the horses was painful to her. Paul began to sense in her the narrow reactions of a landowner, or at least, of an heiress, and was slightly disillusioned. But as she kept going back over this affair, evoking the past life and the character of the persons involved in it, he learned about certain essential qualities of German life.

While a prisoner, Paul had known only one side of Germany: the relentless workings of totalitarianism. He had probably realized that strife and dissension must exist, but he had not imagined all these conflicts between individuals, these conflicts of interest, these local quarrels which, precisely because they were so commonplace, made the country seem human. Carried to great heights of historical intensity, under the surface, Germany still lived by village tradition and customs, with rivalries and squabbles over boundaries. The creation of a partisan militia, though part of the course of History, had become one of those parochial affairs in which everyone bickers and calls everyone else by his first name.

Still, Lena was worried. The partisans could come back, to replace some of the harness or for a supply of fodder. The fact that the men had seen smoke coming out of the chimney added to Lena's anxiety. Fritz Haas was too familiar with the habits of the household not to be curious

about this smoke coming out of an ordinarily uninhabited building. The gallery remained the safest place to stay. Paul and Lena moved the bed out of the little room downstairs. Lena brought a mattress, sheets, and blankets from the house, as well as some clothes which had belonged to her brother. They were only slightly too large for Paul. He felt ill-at-ease after putting them on. The material was unpleasant to him. It had been six years since he had worn civilian clothes, and their lightness and looseness surprised him. He felt naked. Lena handed him a mirror so that he could at least arrange the collar of the shirt. Paul thought that he looked thin, somehow awkward—like a convalescent.

Lena then went to fetch some food and wine. She did not want Paul to go with her; someone could be spying on them from the hill or the edge of the woods. They spent a long time cleaning the loft and built a pile of crates which would hide them if someone broke down the door and came into the hall.

‘We can’t use any lights; there are no blinds in the windows,’ said Lena, after they had put the finishing touches to their quarters. ‘Once it is night, it will be really night, for us.’

She stood in front of Paul. She looked into his eyes. ‘Night.’ She had given certain emphasis to the word. It spread around them, closed in upon them, already, and they lay next to one another, on the unsteady little bed. They closed their eyes, barely opening them as they undressed, precipitously, in the broad light of noon. After making love, they fell asleep.

The roar of a plane woke them up. Paul looked at his watch: four o’clock. The sky had cleared and, outside the window, a yellow sun shone on the treetops. The droning of the engine did not stop. Another more powerful one,

coming from the horizon, drowned it out, reached the zenith and stayed there, as though a prisoner of gravity. Paul put his arms around Lena. She smelled of sleep, the sleep which Paul could still taste in his mouth. The lethargy from which they could not quite emerge gave their pleasure together a greater intimacy; they were united more closely by meeting as they did, in the depths of unconsciousness.

A strident sound, very high-pitched at first, like those which suddenly vibrate in a summer meadow beneath the sun, rose and grew louder, behind the treetops. A fighter plane flew by, very low above the stud farm, cutting through the air with a deafening roar and soon subsiding back into the piercing note which evoked the heat of summer, high grasses, languor.

Languor . . . Paul and Lena now lay on their backs, each with a hand on the other's body, waiting for desire to visit them again, and nothing more. The droning of the planes, which must have been circling high in the sky, did not stop but instead seemed to grow louder. Paul and Lena knew that the fighting was coming closer. They remained silent, aware only of themselves, paying no more attention to the sounds of war than they would have, by the seashore, to the sound of waves rising as the wind changed.

Somewhat later, when the faint roll of artillery fire or bombing sounded in the west, they turned over towards one another, smiling, Lena almost without opening her eyes. Their love was coming back. Perhaps, in spite of everything, they were quicker to acknowledge it than if the horizon all around them had been silent. Without admitting it, they were responding to the threat; there was no certainty that they could make love tomorrow.

Other fighter planes flew by, not so low as the first one.

One of them broke into the drawn-out wail that means a nosedive followed by a steep climb. This noisy arabesque was repeated, this time with a sharp crackling. Paul had no trouble recognizing the sound; a battle was going on right above their heads. The wailing continued for two or three minutes and then faded away into the sky. There was a rather long silence, then several very loud explosions. The panes vibrated in the windows and Lena's hand tightened a little bit on Paul's thigh. He looked towards the window. The sun now shone only on the very highest treetops. Six o'clock. Lena raised herself on one elbow:

'I'm hungry.'

Paul rose and laid the food which Lena had brought on the bed. He went over to open the window. There was a steady rumble in the distance, like that of a heavy convoy. In the sky to the left, planes were still circling and from the same direction came the echo of a rifle volley which persisted for a few seconds, stopped, and then continued. More explosions shook the ground. Not far from the window, in the top of a tall tree which still caught the sunlight, a grey bird jumped from branch to branch. Paul closed the window again and went back to lie next to Lena.

They drank the wine straight out of the bottle; Lena had forgotten the glasses. They were having a good time and drank a lot. They were not fooling themselves completely, however; they knew that they were deliberately exaggerating the carefree and rather dissolute quality in their relationship. Paul wondered if this girl who lay there, bare to the waist, laughing and having a hard time closing her lips over the neck of the bottle, was not drowning some inner despair in the wine.

Her country was falling, her father had perhaps been caught at the front, all the horses were gone and were

probably galloping about over there, in the fire. . . . He looked at her. She stopped laughing and drew him close. They remained motionless, listening now to the roar of battle, suddenly less like lovers than like brother and sister, but knowing very well that even though their consciences were reawakened and they heard the war, there was still only one refuge for them, there was still only one answer: the one which they were about to find, again, in themselves.

The sounds of battle persisted until nightfall. There was then a kind of paroxysm. Planes poured through the smoke-filled sky in close formation. A rosary of bombs exploded directly behind the trees; then a lone plane passed overhead and everything was silent. Paul and Lena had risen and were getting dressed when they heard a scratching at the door. A low whine beneath the door reassured them; it was the dog. He had disappeared during the morning, confused, no doubt, by the departure of everyone in the house and then by the din of battle. Lena opened the door. Straight ahead, through the forest, they could make out the glow of a fire raging in the night.

'Mosfeld,' said Lena.

The Allied troops must already have left the town behind them. During the evening, the sounds of fighting had moved to the left, towards Hirschenberg. Paul asked how far away these two towns were. Five kilometres to the first, seven to the second, if one cut through the woods. Lena answered him briefly and then became quiet, looking out at the reflection of the fire which already seemed to be dying down.

'So *they* are here,' thought Paul. Two hours of walking and he could join them. They were there, the men he had waited for year after year, whose progress he had followed day after day, cursing their slowness, hailing their

victories, those men with the narrow hips, nourished on freedom, just as the child in the famous poster was nourished on powdered milk; they were there, wearing their uniforms, their planes, their tanks, the bright emblems which were less like military insignia than a trademark, democracy having become a tested product. They were there, the men whom he did not know, but whom he had learned to love, at a distance, through films, through a literature full of violence and trees, even through the hypocrisy of their politics. They were there, almost within sight, almost within shouting distance.

And behind them, behind their encampment lit by the burning town, was France, suddenly much closer, with her stone bridges, her roads, her grey villages where everyday life had already taken over; France, where, now, one man talks to another as he pushes a creaking wheelbarrow through the wet evening streets. With its cities, with Paris, where the expressions of passers-by, hastening along the pavements, seem curiously natural to those who have returned, dazed with solitude and empty skies; where the cafés overflow into the street, breaking into a muffled silence, where the Seine flows towards a sunset of black clouds and factories. . . .

Lena's continuing silence worried him. He guessed the reason for it: Lena was afraid that he would go away again. He took her hand and held it tightly. Lena turned her face towards him. He forced himself to smile.

'What about the snares we laid last night?'

He noticed the instant relief which came over Lena. She pointed out that it was hardly the right evening to go out looking for snares. She seemed happy again. Sleep awaited them. Below, the barn was full of shadows. In the distance, the glow from the burning town could no longer be seen.

'I wouldn't have liked it if we won the war,' said Lena. Paul kept himself from asking why.

'We are bad winners,' she went on, after a pause. 'Our saving grace is suffering. Now we'll start to exist again.'

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

'We don't even need to exist any more.'

'That's right!' said Lena eagerly. 'No need to exist at all.'

They said nothing more for a long while, *drinking in* this silence which reminded them that the wheel of fortune had turned, that both of them had stopped belonging to any particular country, that they were alone, among the trees, in their orphaned love.

Suddenly, Lena gripped Paul's arm.

'Look, over there, on the other side of the meadow!'

He could just make out a pale spot which moved about and then faded into the shadows.

'A horse?'

'One of ours, I'm sure!' cried Lena.

She began to run towards the meadow. The horse was somewhere beyond, in the forest. Paul caught up and ran along beside her. They did not stop to wonder about the reasons for this hunt which tore them away from their peaceful refuge, from their love. The horse, white in the darkness, a pale, fleeting whiteness which soon blended into the shadows of the woods, was a reason more urgent than any other reason, a summons, a phantom from somewhere beyond themselves. The horse was walking by. It was not hurrying. It trampled its way into the bushes. It was the colour of their fears, the uncertainty in their hearts and everything that was remote and elusive between them. They reached the edge of the woods, beyond the fenced-in meadow, stumbling, out of breath. Lena stopped and put her hand to her heart.

'I see him!' she cried.

She started running again, between the bushes and the trees. Paul followed her. They lost their footing in the darkness. Paul grabbed Lena by the arm and stopped her.

'We're crazy. He'll never let us catch him.'

Lena held her hand against her forehead.

'You're right. He'll probably come back by himself. We'll leave the gate open.'

She took Paul's hand, so that they could help one another along and they retraced their steps. They had just reached the edge of the woods when they heard, quite nearby, on the right, the rustle of dry leaves and twigs, as though an animal or a man were cutting through the underbrush. The horse was there. They turned around but could not see the whiteness of its coat which had caught their attention earlier. The noise had stopped. Lena clicked her tongue.

'It must be Fittli.'

She caked the horse by this name. Nothing moved. The horse had probably come back from where the fighting had taken place that afternoon and had not recovered from its terror.

'I'm going to try once more to get close to him,' said Lena. 'Stay there. He doesn't know you and maybe that's what he is afraid of.'

Paul let her go but tried to follow at a distance. He heard the same noise as a moment before in the woods ahead of him; the horse was moving away. No, it was the sound Lena made as she walked. She seemed to be heading towards the left. Suddenly Paul heard nothing. Then the rustling started again but this time from another direction entirely, almost behind Paul. He turned around.

'Lena!'

There was no answer. Paul heard a short whistle, then the thunder, as though unleashed, of a full gallop; the horse was fleeing for good. The sound of his hoofs among the fallen leaves died away deep in the woods. Someone came running towards Paul. It was Lena.

‘Did you hear? It was not just Fittli; there were two. But the one behind you had a rider.’

That was why he had heard a whistle; it was a rider signalling to his mount. They looked at one another. It was unlikely that the Americans had any horses. Was it one of the Werewolves, then, who had lost his way? But why hadn’t he come up to them, since Lena and Paul were talking German?

They hurried back to the stud farm where, having closed the door behind them, they set about strengthening it, using a beam driven into the ground as a strut. They reinforced the door which led to the stables in the same way. They decided to sleep fully dressed. The carefree mood of that afternoon had disappeared. They were not alone. Someone was lying in wait for them. The wandering horses were a link with the war, with the survivors who, now that the fires had subsided, had returned to their former feuding and spitefulness.

They could protect themselves from men, by barricading themselves as they had done. But there was still the horse who was probably again looking in their direction, from the edge of the woods, or perhaps already approaching across the meadow, trembling with fear, magnetized by its old haunts. He was their truth, the truth they glimpsed, fleeting and blurred, the truth that lay beyond the door. For both of them were aware of it, at this moment; they bore witness to it in the silence; they did not yet love one another completely. They brought

their loneliness, their bodies close together, but at the very moment when they thought they possessed one another most fully, a part of themselves continued to roam.

They slept until morning. The daylight revived a sound of gunfire far in the distance. A few planes again crossed the sky. Paul and Lena went down to the window in the washroom to watch what was happening on the other side of the meadow. A puff of smoke rose above the trees, in the direction where Mosfeld had burned the night before. The white horse remained invisible. After they had washed, Paul and Lena lay down again. Love kept on bringing them together. Their pleasure was even more intense than the day before; they were more able to guide it. However, they did not attain the same oblivion.

Time, momentarily blotted out, began again. After today, there would be another day, then another and another, without end. The sounds of war would fade away completely. People would open their doors. But Paul and Lena said nothing about what would happen then. Would Lena's father come back? Would Paul want to stay? Would his case be taken up by the new authorities? Did Lena love Paul enough to want their affair to continue? What if she should prefer to go and live with him in France? It would soon become necessary to ask all these questions out loud. As long as the war lasted, one was exempted from the future. This was what had given their love such purity the night before, a sense of being beyond the grave. Now, as the gunfire moved away, they began to read into certain silences.

Towards noon, the sound of a horse's hoofs on the cobblestone courtyard tore Paul and Lena from their reverie. They ran down to the window of the washroom. A man leading a horse by the reins was trying to open the

door to the stables. He was dirty and unshaven. His grey hair fell in a fringe over his forehead. Though his ruddy complexion marked him as a man who lived outdoors, there was something about his sunken chest and the stiffness of his shoulders which suggested privation, perhaps an uneasy conscience. He wore a rifle slung over his shoulder. Lena recognized him.

'It's Fritz Haas, the steward I told you about.'

She seemed very alarmed, suddenly. She jumped off the platform of crates.

'... I must talk to him. He probably came to return the horse.'

Paul held her back. Was this wise? She pulled away; Fritz Haas was a peaceable man. She went out. Paul climbed back to the window and saw Lena go up to the man with the horse. He did not seem surprised when she appeared. The expression on his face was very strange, however. His eyes were red with lack of sleep.

'Did you see Mosfeld burning?' he asked Lena in a trembling voice. 'I went up close, during the night, on the hillside. The thing one cannot imagine is the sparks. Clouds and clouds of sparks. You didn't realize, did you? Mosfeld was worm-eaten, completely rotten on the inside, decayed . . .' He rubbed his thumb and his index finger together to suggest something turning to dust. 'Do you want me to tell you what this means? We are all dead on the inside, too, every one of us . . .'

He sighed, picked up the reins of the horse who stood motionless and laid them over the animal's drooping neck. They slipped; he put them back. They slipped again; he caught them—the patience of a man who is drunk.

'What are you doing here?' asked Lena, exasperated.

'I need oats and hay. The horse is hungry and I haven't

time to let him graze. 'That's what he would like,' he added, dropping the reins and grabbing one of the horse's ears in his hand. The horse did not move. 'Yes. The fact is that we are all dead on the inside. The truth is as simple as that, but we don't want any part of it,' he continued, wrinkling up his eyes and looking down at his feet. 'Otto, you know, Otto Schachenmayer who was here with us the other night, it must have been a small shell from the tank. Not a bullet. A small shell. I suspected they would try to cut us off from the rear. The others and I ran towards the horses. I turned around. Otto stayed where he was to shoot at the tank. As a result, he had no more face. The whole middle part of it was blown away. Everything but his mouth. The mouth is what is left. Sometimes it even gets so big that it swallows up everything: a mouth instead of a nose, instead of eyes, and all the hair stuffed in there too, because the skin from the forehead is gone. . . . You can imagine it for yourself. A big red hole, very wet, big enough to hold both fists, decaying already. Do you want me to tell you . . .'

'Shut up,' said Lena. 'Shut up and give me back the horse!'

'Let me have him a little longer!' said Fritz, nearly pleading with her. 'I have to try to find the others. At least Brücker. When the tank started to fire on us, several of them fell. And some of the horses with them, because we had run to untie them; they were next to us. I had time to get back in the saddle. But not Brücker, or three or four of the others. The horses were afraid; they couldn't hold them. Mine recognized me. From then on it was nothing but a stampede into the woods; you can imagine. I saw Brücker running, holding his belly with both hands. Wounded, I'm sure. He must be lying somewhere.'

'No one made you get into this mess!' cried Lena. 'It was insanity.'

'Insanity, you're right. But not ours. No. Not even the insanity of war. Something happened, up there at the edge of the woods, above the road. It didn't seem like war. We all felt it. We looked at each other. We were sitting there, with the horses tied to the trees. Just men from Mosfeld or nearby, you might have thought it was the town council on vacation. No one said anything. We were waiting. It came very quietly. One tank, just one. It wasn't moving as fast as all that and it didn't seem to know quite where it was going. We watched it, without being able to move, holding our guns in our hands. Then the tank came closer and it all began . . .'

'How many horses do you think were killed?' asked Lena.

'Three or four, and others were probably wounded. I will have to go back to look. I couldn't see very well during the night. I have the feeling that something happened, up there, something which goes beyond us,' continued Fritz in a flat voice, and with a deeply pre-occupied expression. 'Something which goes beyond us. . . . At first sight, when we and the Americans come face to face, or the English, I don't know which, anyway, you can predict just what will happen—disaster. But it seems to me that there may be moments of truth in war, moments which have nothing to do with what goes on, if you see what I mean. It's too convenient just to be the victims. We have been smitten, that's what has happened. We have, and all the other simple fools in Mosfeld like us, and the simple fools of all the Mosfelds in the world, and maybe more than just the fools. Yes,' he added, becoming excited, 'something in man, something of the world has been smitten, and I'm not so sure it wasn't justice . . .'

'You'd better go home, Fritz,' said Lena. 'If there had been any wounded, you would have found them before now. They would have called out to you in the forest. . . . Whose idea was it to come get the horses, the other night?'

'Otto Schachenmayer's. Naturally, you thought it was mine. . . . But none of that matters any more. This morning, before I came here, I went back to the hillside above the valley; such emptiness, it leaves you breathless. And the silence! Smoke, more smoke, rising on all sides, dissolving into the air, with a smell. . . . There is no going back this time. Don't be deceived. Men, the world, and everything else, it's not going to start all over again. In the first place it shouldn't. I certainly don't want it to start all over again!' he added, shaking his head fiercely.

'What is it that you don't want to start over again?' asked Lena, who seemed more and more irritated. 'Such a lot of talk! You'd be better off looking for the missing horses, instead of trying to be a philosopher!'

'Wittgenstein is gone. We even saw him go, yesterday morning, driving by on the road. We saw him go, as we sat there waiting, and no one said a word, you can be sure of that. What difference did it make to us then? . . . He is gone but I can see that the Wittgenstein manner is still with us,' answered Fritz who had reddened slightly. He spoke very calmly. Lena shrugged her shoulders. 'Very well,' continued Fritz, 'I will try to catch the horses . . .'

He started forward, as though to lead the horse into the stable. Just as he was about to step over the threshold, he turned around.

'There is something, though, which I must ask you,' he said to Lena. His voice trembled, with the temerity of the weak, '. . . which I would like to ask because there

are so few of us now. After all, we have to know one another, to know where we stand. Who is the Frenchman?’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Lena, getting worried.

‘I heard the two of you in the woods, last night,’ said Fritz, ‘when you were trying to catch Fittli. I recognized his accent. I didn’t dare show myself, I didn’t know what to expect.’

‘He’s a friend,’ said Lena, very quickly.

Fritz leaned his head to one side.

‘You are right; the nations should mingle their blood. Here we only wanted one kind of blood. You can see it now, all over the road down there. No one has picked them up. Who would have picked them up? There is no one around any more, only those who are lying there.’ Looking down, Fritz ran the back of his hand over his lips. ‘Now I have an idea of what death is . . .’

‘I suppose you do,’ said Lena with a certain indifference.

‘No, you don’t understand,’ cried Fritz, with a ferocity that was surprising in such a meek man. ‘I am not talking about death “by accident” but the kind of death which gives meaning to all existence, which gives it, as someone once said, its transparency. . . . Once I would have called it “the fire of angels” . . . “the fire of angels”,’ he repeated. He seemed distressed. He unwound the reins from his right hand. ‘One day I will find the right words. These are all I have now . . .’

‘You are going to give me back the horse,’ said Lena, visibly disturbed by the strangeness of what Fritz had been saying. ‘I’ll do what I can to find the others. You need to rest . . .’

‘Oh, please, let me keep him, let me find a meaning to all this, a meaning!’ cried Fritz, stamping his foot on the cobblestones.

The horse backed away. Paul jumped down and ran to the door. Fritz watched him coming with a feeble smile. Lena frowned.

'You mustn't shout,' Paul said to Fritz.

There was nothing peremptory in his voice. He felt both pity and sympathy for this man. Because of his apparently deranged mind, the poor fellow no longer knew where he belonged, had forgotten what the war was about, had turned his back on home and was seeking truth in the woods, the truth to which death had given so many faces. Paul recognized a little of himself in this man.

Lena went up to Fritz who had followed the horse when it had taken fright.

'Listen, Fritz, I will let you have him for a few days, on the condition that you look for the horses in the woods and bring them back here.'

Paul nodded in agreement, but Lena did not seem to care whether he approved or not. She was trying to find out what happened to the horses who had survived the battle. She stressed each syllable as though she were trying to communicate to a deaf man, looking Fritz straight in the eye in an effort to hold his attention still for a moment. Fritz explained that only two or three horses had been killed, those who had been left tied to the trees. The others, as he had told her already, had fled and dispersed into the woods the moment the men, with too little time to hoist themselves into the saddle, had released the reins.

Fritz spoke with enough precision for them to believe him, especially since he dwelt upon certain peculiar details: the redness of the tank, Brücker running and then suddenly vanishing into the shadows, the cries of the inhabitants of the burning town of Mosfeld, impossible

to hear at such a distance. . . . Paul wondered if Fritz' madness were not assumed, at least in part. It was as though the man were trying to impress them.

Meanwhile Lena had opened the door to the stable so that Fritz could feed the horse. He went inside, leading his horse by the reins, and Lena, who had followed him, joined Paul outside the door a few seconds later. He was standing still, his head slightly bowed, his brow wrinkled in thought. He looked at Lena. She understood; they could hear no more gunfire, no sound of planes.

'We ought to know where we stand, just the same,' said Paul. 'The radio . . .'

They went over to the house. As they entered the vestibule, Paul felt moved. Lena's life was there, the air she had breathed, the objects she had gazed upon since childhood, the banister, over which she had run her hand, shining in the pale light of a mullioned window. This suddenly-discovered past, slightly melancholy, maintaining certain zones of mystery, gave Paul the feeling that Lena was giving herself to him a second time, that their love, which until then had had something nomadic about it, would now settle down to its proper destiny.

'Your house . . .' said Lena.

He managed a smile. It had been five years since he had set foot in a real house. They went into a room on the ground floor where there was a radio. The shutters were closed, so Lena tried to turn on the lights. In vain. The electricity was dead. They would have to do without news, after all. However, they soon forgot their disappointment; was this silence of the outside world not a kind of protection? Lena opened the shutters and the sun flooded into the room. It was furnished in the hideous Munich style which blossomed at the end of the last century.

'My house,' said Paul to himself. A cold cigar smell lingered in the room. Newspapers with violent headlines, the final slogans of the war, violent even in their typography, lay scattered on a table covered with an oriental rug, fake, no doubt. The tender feeling which had come over Paul as he came into the house gave way to uneasiness. Paul felt as though he were stepping into the shoes of one of those bourgeois Germans whose arrogant complacency had oppressed him for so many years, and who, dependent upon almost visceral creature comforts (furniture, rugs, musty cigar smells) gloated over their glacial virtues. Murder was a part of all this, a cruelty engraved into the landscape itself, in the crook of the dark woods, in the too-piercing green of a corner of the meadow which, glimpsed through the window in the utterly transparent air, took on the supernatural quality of a painting by Cranach or Altdorfer.

To the right, on the other side of the garden, the tops of the trees blended together and rose into a peak. One of them, higher than the rest, started to stir in the breeze. Around it, other branches, not so high and still completely bare, were also swaying, but more slowly, like persons in a conversation, thoughtfully nodding their approval around the one who is talking. These branches sometimes continued waving when the highest treetop had again become motionless, animated by a thought which ran its full course, stimulating new opinions, benevolent afterthoughts. Somewhere, quite close, a nameless bird repeated a cry rather like a pair of rusty scissors rapidly opening and closing.

In the background, in the centre of the woods above the lower trees, still chattering and sometimes blown forward as though in polite disagreement, an ash tree, a very tall one whose numerous branches were already

covered with tight little leaves, shook its head high against the sky and seemed to utter lofty observations, to which a passing flock of birds, swallows no doubt, added a note of far-flung prophecy.

'My horizon,' Paul said to himself and felt a slight anxiety. He shook it off. Lena asked him if he would like to see her bedroom. He followed her up the dark stairway. The room, quite spacious, was brightened by a few frills, cotton prints, embroidered net curtains, much-needed compensation in the heart of this sombre house. 'I feel your neatness and order rustling about me . . . ' On a graceful fruitwood dressing-table stood a photograph of her fiancé. He was in uniform and had posed carefully, with a dreamy expression in his eyes. His head, however, had a virile, if not a martial bearing, which made him look inspired. Dead today, probably. His genius was finding its fulfilment in death. . . . Lena slipped the picture into a drawer of the dressing-table. She gave it a quick little slam—the drawer worked smoothly—which troubled Paul. Women and their instant resources, the way they could control their memories, sending anything into eclipse.

'We can move in here now,' said Lena.

She had opened the window. Outside, to the farthest reaches of the sky, there was still silence. On the right, the treetops were still wavering, as slowly as ever. Paul sat on the bed, a real bed. Deliberately clowning, to cover up the shyness which had come over him, he bounced on the mattress with his hands, trying out the springs. Lena was watching him and smiling when she heard the sound of a gallop and ran to the window. Paul joined her. Fritz was racing his horse across the meadow. Why was he going so fast?

'Fritz!' cried Lena. 'Fritz!'

He heard her, turned around in the saddle and waved his hand. He was laughing. He did not stop.

5

Two days had passed, and Fritz still had not come back, when the horses began to appear. Cautiously, even though they were probably racked with hunger. Like the first one who had come, they lingered at the edge of the woods, on the other side of the meadow and the fence. One could not have said that they stood out against the landscape; they simply added a line here and there, faded away, and reappeared, one almost white, the other three dark, nearly indistinguishable from the background of trees into which they plunged, once again.

While Lena put the house in order, Paul sat in front of the window in the living-room, where the radio was still dead for lack of electricity. He and Lena had agreed that he should spend as much time as possible in this room, so as to watch for the horses. They now knew that the horses would come back. To run after them and try to catch them would be useless. The horses had to be allowed to come out of the woods by themselves, slowly, not all at once, as though they were caught up in a fluctuating tide, drawn both by nostalgia and the shadows, torn from within. All this heralded a new season. The woods were gradually giving birth to the horses.

Finally, one day, a brown mare who had been hesitating by the edge of the woods for some time, came towards the house, keeping close to the fence. Paul and Lena went out through a back door and made a wide circle, so as to come upon the horse from behind. Hearing them approach, she broke into a little trot which brought her into the garden next to the house. The symmetrical

paths, the grass borders and beds of mauve tulips seemed to make her nervous, for she stood very still and jerked her head to one side. Lena came closer, without hurrying, going around the garden in order to be facing the mare this time. She started talking to her as she slowly narrowed the last few yards which separated them. Now she reached her. She took hold of the reins and stroked the flat plane of the horse's jaw. Paul had not moved. He suddenly felt very much alone. Lena was withdrawing into her past. The words she spoke to the mare, her inflexions, brought back a secret understanding between her and this world of meadows and glaring sunshine, an understanding which Paul could never share.

He had never had anything of his own. He had learned while very young how poverty makes you an exile in your own country. There were still those he loved, but he could not possess them unless they were as destitute as he, without ties, without property, without the burden of a past. Starting thus, from nothing, it might be possible to build. This meant that, short of the original independence which so few have preserved, love would have to begin with a complete denial of all that had gone before. The return of the horses, Lena's tenderness with them, showed Paul that this girl would soon be swallowed up by an alien world.

Even now, as she led the newly-tamed mare back to the stable, the green countryside, in the almost cruel precision of spring, was slipping back into place around her, recreating a flawless, Germanic image. Paul began to feel a violent longing for France, where every landscape, at every moment, has something slightly incongruous, inconsistent about it, perhaps a note of vulgarity, but in any case replacing myth by the jolt of reality. Then France faded away again. What did he care about France?

From that day on he stopped watching for the horses, and when Lena suggested that he go to the woods to chase them out into the meadow, he refused. What did he care about the horses? He did not say this, but Lena guessed how he felt.

'I know you don't care whether they come back or not,' she said to him.

It was evening. They sat in the living-room, in the deepening shadows. There was still no electricity and they were trying to save the candles. Paul could barely see Lena.

'What do you mean? Besides, they will come back by themselves. Everything will come back.'

There was bitterness in his last words.

'Everything will come back,' repeated Lena. 'You mean Germany. . . . Yes, I think it will come back. But in a different way,' she added after a pause.

'As if it had to come back!' cried Paul. 'Germany is right here, at hand, very nearly untouched. The meadows, the woods, the horses. . . . What will you have lost in this war?'

'Do you wish I had lost more?'

'Maybe I do,' said Paul. 'One never loses enough. . . .' He caught himself. . . . 'I am talking about things, not people.'

'I don't understand,' said Lena. 'All this is yours now, in a way.'

What did she mean? Her father might still be alive.

'If we married. . . .' said Lena.

Paul hadn't thought of this. He felt a slight anxiety mingled with a burst of happiness. She really loved him then! It was completely dark now. He could no longer see Lena in the corner of the room where she was sitting. Her head was probably bowed, for otherwise Paul would at least have seen a bright spot where her face was. Concentrating his gaze, he was able to make out her

slightly stooped body, more voluminous in its blurred outlines, evoking the silhouette of a pregnant woman, and at the same time, a woman in mourning.

'That's true,' he said.

He did not move nearer to Lena. He sat down against the window. Everything suddenly seemed unreal to him. 'If we married . . .' Never had he been so conscious of the wilderness, the silence which surrounded them. Plans for marriage implied an orderly world with laws and traditions intact, and nothing in this forsaken spring suggested that such a world still existed. But it would come back, it was going to come back. It would establish itself once again before he had time to realize it. One morning, Paul would come downstairs from the bedroom he shared with his wife, with the heavy step that comes over the years, from serenity in love and sleep. In the courtyard, there would be hoofprints in the mud. Autumn, already. Autumn. The anxiety which Paul had felt earlier began to rise in him again; peace would bring many autumns . . .

'The horses must come back,' said Lena. 'They are valuable to us. We need them.'

She was right. The time for everything to return was now at hand. Paul had to resign himself. He had to resign himself to the sight of a world disrupted by war and the risk of death, now pulling itself together, becoming static again; he had to resign himself to the sight of people settling down, coming out of their houses each morning to predict the weather in the autumn sky. He would have to learn to cherish all this, to cherish growing old himself in the midst of daily life, love, duty and the ever-enduring countryside.

'We'll go to the woods tomorrow,' he said to Lena. 'We'll get behind the horses, and make a lot of noise, like

beating for game, and chase them this way. I'll take down the fence along the edge of the woods. They will go through the opening and be caught, as if in a net.'

The next morning, Paul went out to cut down the barbed wire fence for about a hundred yards along the outskirts of the woods. He could not see any horses between the trees. Lena joined him soon afterwards, carrying the noisiest things she could find on the stud farm: two horns and a leather harness full of sleigh bells. Paul cut some sticks with which to beat on the tree trunks.

They then climbed the hill, in order to advance down into the middle of the woods. When they reached the top, they walked away from one another until there was a rather wide space between them and then began to move forward through the woods, blowing their horns, shaking the bells and beating the trees. The foliage, already quite heavy, added to the resonance, and out of this almost childlike activity arose a deafening racket. It was like one of the rites used by certain African tribes to chase the evil spirits off their land.

Paul became absorbed in the game. He forgot about the horses. While blowing piercing calls on his horn, he beat violently on the trees. Often the bark, softened by the flow of sap, would split open. Twigs on the bushes, covered with very green leaves, snapped in the path of his stick. A real punishment. But the trees, too, were guilty. All of Germany was guilty, down to the tiniest insect, the thinnest blade of grass. It was good that all of Germany was guilty. It was good that in its darkest, most secluded corners, there was still no innocence, nothing to allow the anticipated return to common sense, serenity, and a feeling of purity.

This country had counted too much on the redeeming power of nature. Towns burn, men bleed, but there are

always the woods. Look at the woods! See their deep, holy shadows, their crystalline streams! Everything is there to reawaken within us emotions which we had somehow, inadvertently, forgotten to feel. Our salvation is there, for the asking.

No. There was no salvation! From now on this country would have to live in the freedom of despair.

Lena had come a little closer to Paul and she began to laugh when she saw him beating so ferociously. He suddenly became aware of how childish he looked. With a smile, he sent Lena away again, so that their noisy advance would be on as wide a front as possible. Ahead, the rays of the sun pierced between the trees and the frightened birds darted rapidly through them. Paul had not yet seen any horses but he thought that the noise had made them flee on ahead, keeping out of sight. Paul and Lena were not far from the edge of the woods when a rider suddenly appeared on Paul's left. He recognized Fritz.

'What are you doing?' cried Fritz, bringing his horse to a standstill in front of Paul. 'Stop, please, I beg you!'

He seemed so excited that Paul obeyed. Fritz spurred on his horse and headed at a fast trot towards the place where Lena was still blowing her horn. She stopped as soon as horse and rider came up to her. Paul went over. She spoke angrily to Fritz, reprimanding him for not having brought back a single horse.

'They'll come back, they'll come back,' Fritz kept repeating. 'The horses! That's all you care about. Here we are, on the edge of the abyss, with the world about to split in two, and all you worry about is your property!'

'You still sound like a frustrated priest,' replied Lena, with an impatient gesture. 'What do you expect? Life goes on, after all!'

'Yes, but you could try to give it another meaning.'

Fritz turned to Paul, 'Do you realize that we are living in a new era?'

'Yes,' said Paul. 'But we expected it, after all. It's no surprise. What's happening down there?'

'What is happening is precisely something we did not expect. Emptiness and silence—as though it were going to last for ever.'

'No soldiers?'

'I couldn't see any from the top of the hill. Nothing. A void. Light. And a peculiar smell in the air.'

'After an attack there is sometimes a lull and then it starts up again. It's just a matter of days.'

'A matter of days,' replied Fritz, looking at Paul with a malicious expression. 'You distort things to suit yourself.'

'That's enough!' cried Lena. 'If we stay here doing nothing the horses will stop running and come back into the woods. Let's go!'

She grabbed her horn and blew a piercing call. She had started towards the edge of the woods. Frightened by the sound of the horn, Fritz' horse stepped back and began to rear. Fritz' face was contorted.

'Not even any respect for the dead!' he cried. 'The Wittgensteins do not even respect the silence of the dead! This is where Brücker and the others fell and died, I'm sure. Doesn't that mean anything to you?'

Lena turned around.

'Absolutely nothing, Fritz! Sooner or later you will understand!' she shouted, beside herself with rage. 'Right now I order you to take the horse back to the stable!'

She did not look back at Paul who was following her. She was completely carried away by her anger, the Wittgenstein anger, probably. Paul felt out of everything, rejected, if not under fire. Fritz' words had left a lingering impression on him. Perhaps, in the landscape of death

which the steward had seen from the hilltop, there was a glimmer of truth, after all . . .

After calming his horse, Fritz again approached Lena. She had stopped blowing the horn and was walking swiftly towards the edge of the woods, beating the bushes in front of her with a stick.

'You lose your temper over the least little thing,' Fritz said to her in an appeasing tone of voice. 'You have your own ideas; I have mine. Let's not discuss it any longer. And the horse, you certainly don't think that I planned to keep him, do you? Have I ever stolen anything from your father?'

Lena did not answer.

'There are only a few of us left,' continued Fritz, turning to Paul in desperation. 'Everything is ours, all these woods, all this silence, all this truth. We survivors tell ourselves it's luck. What if it were something else? A choice, you might say, or a mission which had been given us? So then, if we start shouting . . .'

'You accuse me of distorting things to suit myself,' said Paul. 'You do a pretty good job of it yourself!'

'I'm not distorting anything,' replied Fritz, moving restlessly in the saddle. 'The fact that the three of us are alone, in the midst of all this emptiness, means something to me, that's all. That's why I come and go, trying to find some meaning, to understand. . . . But it would be simpler to be dead.'

'Go ahead and die, then! No one is stopping you,' cried Lena, who was still walking, with a stubborn look on her face. 'You have always been eloquent, Fritz. But there are other things to do now than make speeches or dream. What have you been living on in the last few days?'

'There are many empty houses,' replied Fritz. 'Sometimes I find something to eat. Not always. But, anyway,

it doesn't belong to anyone now,' he added, turning to Paul with a casual shrug which failed to hide his embarrassment.

Paul suddenly felt an intense dislike for this man. Not that he thought there was anything wrong in what Fritz had done. It was just that his dignity seemed spurious; his fringe of grey hair, no doubt copied from some religious figure, and his way of sniffing which had something guilty or hypocritical about it, bothered Paul.

'What has happened to your wife?' Lena asked Fritz.

He made a vague gesture. She must have gone. Yes, he remembered, she had left the morning of the attack to be with her sister. Fritz had not been home; they might be watching for him. But all this was ancient history, a life that was gone for ever. There was no point in trying to find it again. 'The truth is elsewhere . . .'

'Take the horse back to the stable,' Lena said to him dryly.

She continued walking, without saying anything, towards the edge of the woods, accompanied by Paul. Fritz followed them. When they came out into the open, they saw two horses in the meadow. Lena ordered Fritz to catch them. They still had their harness on. Spurring on his own horse, Fritz was able to catch up with them without difficulty and grab hold of the bridles. He led them into the stable. He left the horse he was riding there, too.

'Stay with us,' Lena said to Fritz when he reappeared at the door. 'You will take care of the horses and help us with everything else. To begin with, go and bury that gun in the woods.'

Fritz did not answer. He seemed sad and resigned. Lena went up behind him, closed the stable door, locked it and took the key.

'If you don't want to, all you have to do is leave.'

Fritz thought for a moment and then held his hand out for the key; he accepted.

From then on, the former steward shared Lena's and Paul's life. In the afternoon, when his work was done, he left on horseback, in the direction of the woods, and did not return until nightfall. He would appear, full of exhilaration, in the darkened living-room where Paul and Lena were sitting.

'Go and get some sleep,' Lena would say. Fritz slept in the little room where Paul and Lena had made love the first night.

'Let him tell us what happened,' said Paul.

He knew that Fritz' stories were for the most part the product of his half-crazed imagination, but now and then he would discover in them a light more piercing than truth. What Fritz pretended to have found was very much like a dream, but through it perhaps gleamed the colours of a new reality, risen out of the war, out of fire and death, strange as an under-sea landscape laid bare by a vast ebb-tide.

'I thought I would go down into the valley,' said Fritz that evening. Lena let him talk; he had managed to catch another of the horses by the edge of the wood. 'Yes, the valley. It was the first time I dared go down there since the attack. I went quite far, to a place I had never seen. I went along a sunken lane, with trees on either side. When I arrived at the end, you won't believe me, but I saw that the trees had no branches. Charred, blackened stumps, that's all they were. There was a man sleeping in a field, among them. I said to myself: of course he couldn't have found a spot in the shade, there is no more shade. Then I thought, you poor fellow. . . . I went closer. I was right. His face was blue. Dead, you understand. As I was

about to turn him over, I suddenly thought it might be Brücker. You never can tell. Well, it wasn't Brücker. The village lay just ahead. I went up close, without daring to go in. Right there, where the street began, a large white sheet was hung between the houses.'

'The flag of surrender,' said Paul.

'I don't know. And besides, when I saw white . . . Actually, something had been painted on the sheet. It had faded. One could see just the traces. A face, perhaps. Can you guess? The Face of God. Why not? I tried to see more clearly but a wind had risen. The sheet blew higher and higher. I leaned to one side and then the other. I moved about. And then suddenly, a scream. An ear-splitting scream.'

Fritz let out a kind of strangled howl. Lena rose.

'Go to bed!' she cried. 'Get out of here!'

She was trembling with rage.

'Wait until he tells us what happened,' said Paul. He turned to Fritz. 'It wasn't necessary to imitate the scream.'

'But it was so piercing! You can't imagine,' replied the former tenant farmer. 'It came from behind the houses . . .'

Lena rose and marched out of the house, slamming the door behind her. Paul thought he should join her. He, too, went to the door. He opened it to show Fritz the way out.

'You can tell me the rest tomorrow . . .' He frowned. 'But I don't understand. You said the village was deserted.'

Fritz was already in the corridor.

'Deserted, yes. Everything is deserted. But, listen, I think I was wrong. There is something there . . .' He stood at the threshold. Beyond the meadow, one could see the black mass of the woods, and above that, the stars. Utter silence. Nothing had ever happened on this earth. 'I'd like to go back there now,' continued Fritz. 'One can

learn a lot at night. And besides . . .’ He lowered his voice. ‘. . . I have the feeling that at night I’m somehow needed down there,’ he said, with a sweep of his arm that took in the pastures and the woods. ‘I or someone else, of course, someone who tries to understand, to learn from all this silence, all this death. It will soon pass. And then it will be too late. You understand what I mean: too late for every one of us.’

Paul gave him a gentle push out through the door. He was annoyed at himself for having listened. Not even a madman, just a simple-minded soul who was indulging his superstitions. The Face of God on a sheet! Of course the country was partly Catholic and the inhabitants of the village might have thought that by hanging the sheet they could ward off the violence of the enemy. But then there were the burned trees and, above all, that scream in the empty white village, four days after the fighting had moved on. . . .

When Paul went into the dark bedroom, he saw Lena lying face down on the bed. He went near her and stroked her head. She turned over. Had she been crying? He couldn’t tell but he was surprised to find that he hoped she had.

‘You encourage him!’ she said. ‘You enjoy listening to those atrocious stories.’

He explained that he was trying to find out, through the delirious rantings of the steward, what was happening on the other side of the woods. It was impossible to feel at ease in the midst of such silence, such emptiness, such isolation. . . . Lena shook her head.

‘No. You hate this country and you let yourself forget that this man is lying. It makes you happy . . .’ She sat up. ‘Is he lying, or not?’

‘Yes, of course he is lying. But you are making a

mistake,' said Paul, sitting down on the bed. 'The devastation, the emptiness, none of that could make me happy. It was only that I thought you had accepted defeat.'

'I accept it. But I don't want people to talk to me about death. I don't want to hear about death. I want it all to be over with as soon as possible.'

'It's over already, I'm sure,' said Paul. 'There are only the traces left.'

'But what about that scream he told us about?'

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

'He imagines things.'

They remained silent for a moment. The sound of a horse's hoofs rang out on the cobblestones next to the stable.

'He's going out. He says that he learns things at night.'

'I hope he never comes back! If he's there tomorrow, I'll fire him. I wanted him to help us, to tell us what was going on, to go into the village to buy food, if there is any left, but he's too demented, or else too cruel.'

'Why don't we go down into the valley ourselves?' asked Paul.

'I'm afraid. We don't know how things stand. I'm afraid for you.'

She explained: if the Germans were still there, he might be arrested.

'But they have gone!' cried Paul, irritated by her voice which sounded slightly hopeful to him.

'They could have come back. There must still be snipers in the woods.'

Paul stared intently at Lena. Their faces were close enough to one another for Lena to notice, in spite of the darkness, the glimmer of suspicion in Paul's eyes. This troubled her.

'It might be the others. . . . But of course, you're right,

it's obviously the others, the Allies. But they will try to send you home by force. Or else they might put you in prison. Who knows?' She smiled. 'They will consider you a traitor.'

'What on earth do you mean? We have simply been making love. We will prove it to them.'

Lena fell back on the bed, laughing.

'We will prove it to them.'

She laughed uncontrollably, without stopping. 'I'll slap her,' thought Paul. He rose.

'Stop it!' he cried.

Her laughter faded. Why had she mentioned treason? A suspicion was coming to light in Paul's mind. When he had questioned her the night they met, Lena had denied having any political connections, but she could have lied. At that time their relationship still seemed to have no future, and she did not need to worry that what she said might be contradicted later on. Considering the coercive methods of recruiting used by the national socialist party, and also Lena's father's activity as a local official, and the social position of their family, it was certain that Lena had been the object of overtures, pressures. Had she been able to resist?

'But if she had been won over to the cause, she would not have loved me. To her I would have been the enemy, or in any case, an inferior. Unless she had suddenly, very conveniently, repented . . .' He was carried away by his imagination. His suspicions suddenly seemed so loathsome that he felt a violent need to get away, to escape these shadows that were closing in upon him. But he knew that he would stay in the room. Lena was undressing. In a moment, his body would be next to hers. They would caress one another, make love to one another, and he would forget the night that lay over Germany, vast and

fluctuating as the sea; he would no longer feel, in the world, or in this girl, the ineradicable dividing lines.

His doubts did not return until the next day, when Fritz reappeared. The former steward probably knew everything about Lena's past. Paul went up to him. He had to talk to him anyway. He and Lena had agreed: Fritz would either give up his lying, his fabrications, or leave. His mental aberrations were not sufficient explanation; Fritz was acting. They would give him specific errands to do. He would go to Mosfeld, see if anyone was still living there, and bring back information and food. The town could not have burned up entirely; the inhabitants could not all have died or disappeared. A few were friends of Lena's. Fritz would take letters to them.

'I already told you that Mosfeld is a dead town, a town of ashes,' replied Fritz, who was busy taking care of the horses. He opened his mouth to say something more, but stopped. He had guessed that they were suspicious of him and were watching his words.

Was there no other village in the vicinity where there still might be a little life?

'What life are you talking about?' asked Fritz. 'I know,' he continued, without waiting for an answer. 'You would have liked everything to go right on or start again. Well, that is not what has happened; death is all around us and we have to face it.'

He had said too much about this already. He turned his back on Paul and went to the back of the stable for some fodder. Paul followed him.

'Let's talk seriously . . .'

'Death all around us!' continued Fritz. 'No more Germany, nothing. Even if there are still a few last souls moving along close to the walls, dashing into the houses like rats as soon as anyone approaches, it doesn't change

anything. They don't exist. As long as they haven't discovered the new meaning of things, they won't come back to life. All they have to do is keep their eyes open. Good Lord, that's easy enough! As for me, when I come across any corpses, I turn them over to find out whether I know them. And I say to myself: yes, I know them; of course I know them. I look at the trees; I look at my horse. All this, you see, has to fit together. There is something in it to be discovered. Hasn't this ever occurred to you? After all, the truth is there, somewhere!'

'Truth! A lot you must have cared about it in the last few years,' replied Paul. 'Now it suits you to play the wise man. You were a member of the Party, I suppose?'

'No,' said Fritz. 'But you're right. I was very much mistaken, just the same.'

'What about the others in this house, were they involved in politics?'

'Wittgenstein was the local party official, or something like that.'

Paul interrupted.

'And Lena?'

He looked away as he asked this question. Fritz started to laugh.

'She was too busy with love affairs!'

Paul felt himself turn pale. He tried to smile.

'You mean she had a lot of admirers?'

'Why are you trying to make me talk?' cried Fritz, moving away. 'You want to make yourself unhappy; I have known that for a long time. But what will your unhappiness amount to? Nothing. Nothing at all. You are here, hanging around this girl's skirts, while outside, all around you, is the truth. A kind of truth that has never happened before . . .'

He had moved towards the door and was standing at

the threshold, his head thrown slightly backwards, breathing deeply. Paul was surprised to feel so hurt. He would have preferred Lena to have politics in her past. Then he could have blamed her environment, the irresponsibility of youth. Lena's sin would have been only of the mind. By choosing him, and loving him, she would have been washed clean of her mistakes. But, this way, her love for him was like an automatic response, the stubborn perseverance of an appetite which could be satisfied no other way and which, tomorrow, might settle for someone new. But what if Fritz were lying? Lena was right; they should get rid of this man. He went up to him.

'You will have to go, Fritz. We have decided. We don't need you any more.'

'What about the horse?' asked Fritz, alarmed.

Paul thought of pushing the former steward out through the door, locking it, and putting the key in his pocket. Fritz must have guessed what he had in mind, for he looked at him with a hurt expression. Paul deliberated a moment.

'Take him and get out of here as fast as you can!'

Fritz led the horse out of the stable and leapt into the saddle.

'If you need me, one of these days,' said Fritz to Paul, after he had mounted, 'look for me on the other side of the woods, at the bottom of the hill. I spend every day there. In the part where all the ferns are, you'll see.'

Paul did not answer and Fritz rode away. Paul came back to the house. Lena looked out of a window on the second floor.

'Where is he going now?'

'Towards the truth,' replied Paul. 'He doesn't think there is much around here. And he's right, so right!'

He now stood under the window.

'Why do you say that?' asked Lena.

Paul walked away, towards the garden.

'Just as a joke.'

It was true. He felt ridiculous. That fit of jealousy, earlier! He told himself that the Germans were so stupid in love that the girls they left behind still possessed a kind of secondary virginity. He was going to marry Lena. He had already left his mark upon her . . .

'Paul!' cried Lena. He turned around. 'Look.'

She held out her arm. On the other side of the meadow, a jeep had just stopped in front of the gate. Two men in khaki were trying to open it. They saw Paul, and Lena in her window, and waved at them.

'I had better open it for them,' said Paul. He was worried. He suddenly realized how happy he had been for the last week, oblivious of the world.

He went into the house to pick up the key to the gate. Lena came running downstairs. She put her hand on Paul's arm.

'We still have time to escape . . .'

'Where would we go?'

He went to the door. The jeep had started up again and was moving along the edge of the woods to the large opening which Paul had made in the fence a few days earlier. It turned into the meadow and then back on to the road leading to the house. Paul ran to open the inner gate. He thought it would be a good idea to appear eager. Lena had followed him. She took his hand and held it in her own. The jeep stopped in front of them. Besides two soldiers, there was also a young dark-haired woman in uniform. She stood up and smiled.

'Any children?' she asked, in German, with an engaging smile.

'Children?' repeated Paul, who did not understand.

'Yes, children,' said the young woman, smiling even harder and holding out her hand to indicate the stature of a small child. She reached towards the back of the jeep into a pile of paper boxes, and took out a large round can. She held it up.

'Milk! Milk!' she repeated with cheerful patience, as though she were talking to morons. 'Powdered milk,' she added, using her finger to mimic the act of diluting it. Without success. A note of sadness came over her face.

'We give!' she said, emphasizing each word and holding the box out to Lena. 'No money!'

'We have no children,' said Paul.

The smile came back over the young woman's face.

'Oh, I'm so sorry!' She put the can back into one of the boxes. The driver started up the engine again. The young woman waved her hand. 'Good-bye!'

The jeep backed up quickly, made a half circle and drove away. Paul and Lena looked at each other; the war was over.

Lena and Paul waited a few more days before going down into the valley. Concerned over what Fritz had said about Mosfeld, they decided to go to Hirschenberg, a rather more important town, about a two-hour walk from the stud farm. They cut through the woods and when they came out from under the trees, they could see, gleaming beneath them in the sun, the slate roofs of the town, apparently unharmed. The sight of them must have made Lena very happy for as they walked down through meadows already covered with tall grasses, she pointed out again and again to Paul how nothing had been destroyed.

Far from being offended by the feelings revealed in Lena's words, Paul found it comforting to see these houses pressed one against the other, their white façades no doubt hung with signs, smoke rising from their chimneys, and somewhat behind, a church whose banality was in itself reassuring. The world stricken by death which Fritz had described might perhaps have been more fitting, or at least more fertile than this one, in these times when new truths were to emerge from the shock of defeat. But the power in this rather venerable scene (the still medieval confines of the town, its stepped gables which stood out now, as they came closer) revived that craving for permanence which war had not overcome.

Fear, suffering, and the spectacle of death had liberated no one. Once again people would enclose themselves within a network of alleys, breathe quietly beneath a roof, sink back into memory, shadow, and the natural postures of error. Those who came down to town through the meadows would see this jumble of slanted rooftops, some gleaming in sunlight, others a dull black. They would hurry past enclosed gardens with borders of mauve flowers whose name they could never remember . . .

'Hyacinths,' said Lena.

. . . and they would feel happy to be human.

However, as Paul and Lena came into town, they noticed a stir of activity which made it clear that these were not yet normal times. American army trucks were driving about through crowded streets. People walked rather quickly, paying no attention to the military vehicles which brushed past them. The women were more numerous than the men, who, for the most part, were old. The bearing and clothes of many of the men revealed their urban origins, and made them seem strangers, in the midst of the women who were

unmistakably inhabitants of this country town, or the neighbouring villages.

The indifference which the passers-by, as a group, showed towards the military vehicles and their occupants could at first be explained by the fact that two weeks after an invasion people would naturally have become accustomed to the occupying forces. It was only after a closer look at the crowds that one noticed eyes staring fixedly ahead, obviously determined to avoid a painful sight.

The soldiers, for their part, many of them half reclining on the seats of their jeeps, with a foot braced against the windshield, seemed to pay little heed to the pedestrians or the sights around them. Their rôle as conquerors did not make them arrogant or self-satisfied. They simply wore an air of exaggerated nonchalance, perhaps to show that theirs was a nation powerful enough to carry off a victory between two yawns.

These impassive faces on both sides, this casual mood, even though it may have been a bit forced, tense here and there, erased any sense of participating in a major event. Hirschenberg was only a very small garrison town with rather congested streets. Dirty, too, it must be admitted, strewn with torn paper, straw, clods of earth left by tank treads which had left their mark in the asphalt. This refuse was the only evidence of history, the only note of outrage in this commonplace scene which had nothing remarkable about it except perhaps that the people on the pavements and those in the street did not know one another.

Now and then, in the curve of a street, in alleys or along a wall, in places that were less crowded, less frequented by the military vehicles, Paul would catch sight of a man, who was still young, but thin and frightened-looking. The clothes he wore were shabby,

or at least ill-fitting. No tie. From the bulges of his pockets one could tell that he carried the things a man takes with him when he escapes: essential toilet articles, a piece of bread. When he found himself in an inconspicuous corner, the man would appear to be waiting for the crowd to thin out and for the jeeps to stop driving about, before dashing across the mined open spaces. As he walked, grazing the wall, or crossed the street with a kind of sullen withdrawal into himself the moment he noticed anyone coming in the opposite direction, he did not hide his haste but moved on, his shoulders slightly bowed, as though beneath a cloudburst.

Paul thought that they were probably arresting the soldiers who had been part of political organizations, the SS volunteers, volunteers in foreign anti-Bolshevik troops, maybe even the ordinary *feldgrau*. Why didn't they plan to punish all of military Germany? This would have pleased Paul; the devastation wrought by war should be carried as far as it could go. And this should be true for the victors as well as for the vanquished. The war would not be lost if everyone found himself shuddering under a common justice.

However, influenced by the sentimentality which rose within him at the sight of this ancient town, with its narrow streets, its rich millers' houses with their black portals, with the dull ring of its iron chimes high in the bell-towers, he noticed that the only young people in the streets were those who wore a mask of famine and fear, and clothes as loose as his own. Like him, they had come of age in History. It was with these escapees, whom he had passed and who sometimes wore cowardice across their faces, that one had to deal, to build the foundations of peace.

'The foundations of peace'—a nice formula. It probably

would have thrilled him six years before. Since then, there had been too much silence. Now he dreamed only of private encounters and solitary plans, and, suddenly, amidst the motley throngs that filled the streets of Hirschenberg, he remembered Fritz, Fritz on his horse, who perhaps had followed them, he was quite capable of it, and who now stood motionless on the hill at the edge of the woods, looking down on them, watching them plunge into the twisting streets, beneath the rooftops of gleaming slate. . . . Paul and Lena had been walking for a long while now without saying a word, and had passed by the same places several times. Paul stopped.

‘Tell me, where are we going?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Lena. ‘I’m trying to work out where everyone else is going and they seem to be going nowhere.’

It was true, when they returned to a spot where they had been a few minutes earlier, Paul recognized several faces, even one of the young men with the hunted expressions. Why was everyone going in circles? By walking straight ahead for ten minutes one could go past the gardens into the open fields. Above the town lay the forest. What if Fritz had not been lying? What if all of Germany were really dead, with just a few military posts here and there, surrounded by a void, which held the inhabitants captive more surely than any walls and gates?

‘But what is the point of all this?’ cried Paul, becoming exasperated.

He had spoken too loud, with an accent that he knew could be recognized, but no one turned around to look at them.

‘What is the point of all this?’

The stores which usually sold food were all closed. Did the currency still have any value?

'I would like to straighten out our situation,' Lena said finally, with a timid note in her voice. 'I have the feeling that, legally, we don't exist. It gets rather frightening after a while.'

She led him along again.

'I saw that the town hall was open. People were going in. I didn't dare tell you right away. I wanted to think about it. But if you agree . . .'

'Agree about what?'

'About everything. There are risks, you know them better than I do. First of all they could arrest you and send you back by force. I think we should face that possibility. But if I lose you, nothing exists for me any more. You know that.'

She had stopped and put her hand on Paul's forearm. She held on very tightly. He thought he felt the tips of her fingernails digging through the cloth of his jacket, but he did not draw away.

'Then why risk losing me?'

'I want them to recognize us. There is no such thing as peace if one has to hide. We will see if peace really means freedom now.'

What if such a peace did not exist? What if they repatriated him? And forbade her to follow him? Paul felt a certain excitement mingled with his anguish. A gamble. Everything was suddenly left to chance: their pleasure when they lay together, what they had said to one another, the hours of the night when they woke at the same time, when the meadow before them was white with dew and moonlight, when their voices were muted by nocturnal lucidity, by everything they saw or imagined, almost simultaneously, the buildings of the stud farm, full of leather idols, the stable where the four horses stirred beneath the low beams in the darkness and loneliness,

now that the others were not coming back. . . . And what if Lena herself were to be alone, vulnerable, in the big grey house, going upstairs, downstairs, and back upstairs again, while the horses, beyond the meadow and the withered garden, tugged at their chains next to the manger, unhappy horses drinking from the same springs as the men. . . . Yes, she was right: it was just as well to risk all this.

The corridors of the town hall were full of people walking back and forth in every direction and bumping into one another. Here and there small groups stood clustered in the doorways, parting occasionally to let a man come out who held a paper in his hand and was reading it over and over again, feverishly. From within, someone would call out a number, and the cluster of people would close in upon the gap left by the person who had been called. Lena asked what was being given out: certificates which made it possible to obtain food rations and blankets from another office.

'Blankets only if you are refugees!' added the man whom she had questioned, looking at them suspiciously.

Lena and Paul walked on. They did not have the patience to wait, and besides, to be eligible for ration cards it was obvious that Paul would have to make his status legitimate, to obtain a permit for his stay here. They looked for the registry offices. These were almost empty; people were being born no doubt, but marriages were being postponed. As for the dead, probably no one bothered to register them, they were still part of the war. Paul hesitated in front of the three windows, births, deaths, marriages. He approached the last of them. Was it not because he wished to marry Lena that he was trying to re-establish his identity in society? Lena had taken his

arm. He could feel that she was moved and was embarrassed.

'Military headquarters, up one flight,' replied the old functionary to whom he explained his problem. The man did not raise his head.

In the military offices, some American NCO's were seated at tables, examining papers which the German secretaries brought them. Men were waiting on a bench. Some of them, bareheaded, wore German army tunics stripped of insignia and stripes. Paul felt full of misgivings. Wouldn't the Allies, who stood there and looked at him, their curiosity aroused already, regard his decision to stay in Germany and marry Lena as a disgrace?

One of them, red-faced, with a brutal expression, seemed to be annoyed by Paul's motionless presence and summoned a secretary to find out what the new arrival wanted. Lena had remained behind, near the door. She did not come forward until Paul had begun to speak. He laid his hands on the wooden counter that separated the visitors from the employees and looked down at them frequently as he began his story in a low voice. As soon as he felt Lena come close to him, some of his confidence returned.

'... she hid me.'

Should he have kept this back? The secretary leaned over the form where she had written down Paul's name and the prisoner-of-war camp where he had been held.

'What is your name and address?' she asked Lena in an impersonal tone of voice.

'Don't you remember any more?' said Lena.

The secretary blushed, jotted something down on the form and then hurriedly turned her back on Paul and Lena and went up to one of the Americans.

‘A school friend,’ whispered Lena. ‘A month ago she was still the most eligible girl in town.’

The red-faced soldier got up slowly as he read the form which the secretary had given him. He came up to Paul, crossed his arms, and rested his whole weight on the counter. He looked up, from beneath blond eyebrows.

‘Just when did you escape?’

He spoke German without an accent. Paul thought back. He realized that he had lost track of time. He gave an approximate date. A few feet behind the American, the secretary was looking intently at Paul. She was quite a tall, blonde girl, rather pretty. There was fear in her eyes. She looked down as soon as she noticed that Paul was watching her and started arranging some papers.

‘Why escape so near the end?’ the American asked Paul. ‘We were almost there; didn’t you know that?’

‘Yes, I knew,’ said Paul. ‘I hit a German, the secretary of the local unit of the national socialist party. He wasn’t moving any more. He was bleeding.’

He looked down again at his hands. Was Lena still close by? He had not yet told her about this. Just why he hadn’t, he would not have been able to say. But now, this declaration, made in the hope of vindicating himself in the eyes of the American, of gaining his support, this sudden clean breast, in broad daylight, in the presence of the secretary who, he noticed by the silence, had stopped rustling papers, seemed to Paul to be a kind of affront to Lena.

‘Hit him with what?’ asked the American, a playful note in his voice already. He lowered his voice, however. This tone of complicity made Paul uncomfortable.

‘A stick.’

The American screwed up his face and smiled.

‘Well, well, my friend!’

He stood up and stroked his chest with his left hand, on top of his tunic, as he read over Paul's papers, apparently far-sighted, holding them way out in front of him.

'Wait a moment.'

He walked away and into the next room, first knocking at the door. Paul turned towards Lena. She gave him a look of great happiness, as though overjoyed by Paul's revelation. She reached furtively for his hand.

'Everything will be all right, you'll see.'

A few minutes passed. Lena let go of Paul's hand; the American was coming back, followed by another of his countrymen, younger and slimmer than he, an officer, no doubt, and also by an old, grey-haired man in civilian clothes. They came up to Paul. He heard a noise behind him; the Germans who had been waiting rose all at once, almost upsetting the bench. The officer held up his hand to make them sit down again.

'We will see that your papers are in order at French headquarters,' he said to Paul. He stared at him and Paul stared back. Seen at close range, the officer was still an adolescent. He spoke high-school German. Nothing in his face or his eyes suggested much intelligence, but he must have learned somewhere that on certain occasions, it was wise to stare intently at people. 'We need you.' He turned towards the grey-haired man.

'The deputy mayor will explain.'

'The buildings of your stud farm are still in good condition, I should imagine?' the official began. 'Miss Wittgenstein, step up here please. This concerns you, primarily.'

Lena approached.

'What has become of your father?'

'He disappeared two weeks ago,' replied Lena, dryly, her head held high.

'I thought as much. . . . You won't find many of them around here these days; they have all got out,' he added, smiling, addressing himself to the officer who was quite indifferent to his observations. 'Yes, the main barn of your stud farm is enormous,' continued the deputy mayor. 'I used to hide near there, while I was in the underground. From the woods I could often see the horses grazing in the meadow. Magnificent creatures. Do you still have them?'

'There are only four left,' said Lena.

'Do you like to ride, Lieutenant? Here is a superb opportunity,' said the official, turning back to the officer, who, for the last few moments, had been watching the secretary file papers. The officer did not answer.

The deputy mayor was embarrassed and ran his hand over his mouth. Knitting his brow, he came back and leaned across the counter in front of Paul.

'We are going to send you some refugees from the east. We have no place for them. You have plenty of room there. We will provide the food. . . . Let's see, in the main barn you could take care of at least fifty. At least fifty,' he repeated, to attract the attention of the officer to whom he did not seem to dare address himself any longer.

'Nowhere near enough,' said the officer, sitting down with a thud on the table which the secretary had just cleared. 'You could certainly fit in more; they would simply have to be closer together. What do you think?' he asked Paul.

'I have no opinions to express in this matter,' replied Paul. He was stunned.

'What do you mean?' cried the officer, coming to life for the first time. 'I naturally intend to put you in charge of this little camp. You speak German; you seem educated; and you are on our side. The opportunity is

too good to miss. Furthermore, you have a wife. Why should I send one of my noncoms to die of boredom in your stable? You will be fed from our supplies and paid. Paid in dollars. If you will please follow me, we will work out the details.'

He started back towards his office, noticeably satisfied by his show of authority, and smiling at the secretary. Paul looked at Lena. She seemed worried. She shrugged her shoulders.

'We have to accept. It probably won't be for long.'

The deputy mayor had pushed open a swinging door in the counter. He stepped back to let Paul through and followed him into the adjoining office where the officer and the red faced American were waiting for them.

'What was the name of the German you killed?' the officer asked.

'I'm not sure he's dead,' replied Paul.

'We will make inquiries. His name?'

Paul told him.

'And the reason you hit him?'

'He slapped me. A quarrel . . . I already told you he was a party official!' Paul added, more vehemently.

'We don't hold anything against you,' said the officer. 'But he was a civilian; we have to investigate. One slap . . .'

Perplexed, he looked to his subordinate who also appeared to be weighing the gravity of the offence and shook his head slowly back and forth, before pursing his lips to express his approval.

'It is a possibility; yes, it is conceivable . . .' he said.

'You see, there will be a community of fifty or so persons under your authority,' the officer continued, again staring at Paul. 'People who have come to ask our protection. I am not saying that there will be no political

agitators among them. We will soon find out. We will make inquiries, we will submit them all to psychological tests. But you will have to avoid quarrels.'

'How long will they stay?' asked Paul.

'Until they are resettled or rehabilitated. . . . Yes, I don't want any slaps, any beatings. We are here, you understand, to establish peace, to demonstrate its advantages. Such an incident would be most unfortunate. . . . We are no longer in the Middle Ages.'

He smiled indulgently at Paul.

'Of course. But when all this took place, it was the Middle Ages!' cried Paul.

'Now let's not exaggerate!' said the deputy mayor, suddenly asserting himself and forgetting his subservient condition. 'Let us not exaggerate! Some atrocious things have indeed taken place in this country. I was in a better position than you to know about them. I have always been a militant Social Democrat. I had to go into hiding. . . . Yes, some atrocious things . . .' He held up his hand and closed his eyes. 'The camps . . . I mean the concentration camps. Certain of the concentration camps, that is. . . . But it has always been a strictly political struggle,' he continued with fervour. 'We know who was involved and, believe me, we intend to use our victory to advantage, intelligently. Striking anyone down with a stick . . . out of the question. Anger, retaliation, petty squabbles are extraneous. Quite extraneous. Local problems, for the police. . . . Come now, let's forget about all that!'

'Precisely, let's forget about it,' said the officer, who seemed irritated by the deputy mayor's long tirade. 'We will give you the necessary papers. You will have the status of a contractor. If you run out of anything, food, clothing . . . for yourselves, you understand, we are here.

I will assign you a jeep. Our company has been ordered back to Ratisbon. You will be under the authority of headquarters Eighteen here in town, and UNRRA, of course.'

'When will they arrive?' asked Paul.

'The refugees? I have no idea,' said the officer. 'They are temporarily scattered about on the farms in this vicinity. They will have to be collected. But don't worry, they'll come. They won't stop coming. From every direction. It's incredible how people in Europe love to wander about!'

A quarter of an hour later Paul and Lena found themselves outside again. Thanks to the papers which Paul had been given, they were able to obtain everything they needed from an American PX installed in the former offices of the national-socialist party in Hirschenberg. There was no jeep available. Heavily burdened, they started back along the road through the woods. Night was falling. A clear night. The storm was over and all of Europe was stirring, like a distressed anthill.

7

It was at that moment that the spring, the spring which until then had been bitter, imprisoned, which had held back all the leaves except those on the highest branches, began to unfold completely. The sun became hotter. It no longer sent pale wisps of light along the forest floor, but pierced the shade with patches of brightness in which a lobed silhouette (from an oak leaf, lost high overhead in the motion of the sky) flickered back and forth, shimmering and almost transparent.

These masses of green exploding on all sides, even along the ground, submerged the stud farm, the house,

and the meadow, already shimmering with tall grasses, a little deeper into the dazzle of noonday. A world of fleecy treetops spread out in endless waves beyond the edge of the four woods. To distinguish between them, Paul had given each a different name, for locally they were all referred to under the general name of Unterbach.

The wood opposite the stud farm was now the *Schreiwald*, or the Forest of the Cry. On the left, to either side of the road, was the *Treffenwald* or Meetingwood. Behind it was *Apfelwald* or Applewood, and finally, on the hillside to the right was *Nachtwald*, Nightwood, or sometimes *Fluchtwald*, the Forest of Flight. For a long time Paul could not make up his mind which it should be. Had he been forced to escape, he knew that he would have set off in the direction of the hill. He could not have said why. He decided reluctantly on Nightwood. The other name might have betrayed him.

And yet he felt no desire to leave. The spring filled him with contentment, and the luxuriance of the leaves, the density of the forest, gave him an impression of security, of isolation. Also the feeling of starting a new life. . . . He had repaired the opening which he had made in the fence and every morning he let the horses out of the stable. They completed the landscape. At certain times, he felt tenderly towards the animals. At others, he feared them, and put off the changing of their bedding which exposed him to bites and kicks.

Lena helped him fill the mangers, and bring fresh water. They did not speak to one another while they worked. When the chores were done, they met on the threshold of the stable, their hands dirty, their hair over their foreheads, wisps of straw stuck to their clothes, and lingered there to look at the evening sky, still without saying anything. They felt full of weariness and silence. Perhaps this

was happiness. They went slowly back to the house.

'Someone must have revoked the orders,' said Lena. 'They won't come, you'll see.'

Ten days had passed since their trip to Hirschenberg.

'I suspect the worst,' replied Paul. 'They are on their way, or else their credentials are being checked. Everything is too calm; something will happen. Whenever it has been calm in my life, I have had to watch out. I could sense that something would happen. Before I hit the lame man, everything had been quiet for a long time. Everyone was waiting. I was waiting. And when he arrived, or in any case, shortly after, I realized that it was the moment I had been waiting for. But I feel that when one is waiting like this, there must be something to do to ward off what is coming. Especially this time, for we have been warned. . . . There must be a way to act, some single but effective thing to do. But how can we find out?'

They were talking like this one evening, as they walked slowly back to the house. The sky was an inky blue. The approach of a storm? Lena ran her hand along the wall of the stable. She stopped.

'What if we set it on fire?'

She leaned against the wall. Paul looked at Lena. On her face was a faint smile. Her eyes seemed bigger. Because of the shadows, perhaps. Paul looked up towards the ridge of the building, whose proportions seemed even more imposing in the encroaching darkness.

'Fire? . . . But the horses . . .'

'Of course it would be best if they were killed. Otherwise, no one would believe us.'

'No. That's impossible. Not the horses!' said Paul.

'Oh, I don't know; sometimes I ask myself . . .'

She was staring at Paul. He felt apprehensive. He turned around: in every direction lay the woods, the four

black woods which he had named, now silent, escaping all designations. This overwhelming solitude . . .

'Are you afraid?' Lena asked him. 'Would you rather have a band of Prussian peasants invade us tomorrow? Think it over; instead, there could be black ruins, the ruins of Wittgenstein!' She started to laugh and then suddenly stopped. 'You are right, about the horses,' she continued. 'They could break down the doors to their stalls. Let's take that risk. But the fire, the fire for its own sake!'

'The fire for its own sake.' This meant nothing, and yet, in these words, something became clear to Paul. He had not seen any of Germany burn, except for the distant glow of the fire in Mosfeld. He imagined the trees on the outskirts of the woods, suddenly standing out in the glow, and the meadow with the terrified horses rearing like those on fountains.

'Come and look at it with me,' said Lena. 'We haven't been inside for a long time.'

He followed her to the door of the big barn. Once inside, they were surprised at how light it was. Perhaps because of the whiteness of the walls, perhaps also because of the contrast offered by the black harness hanging against them. The silence seemed even deeper than outdoors, where, however, nothing was rustling or moving at that hour. A room outside of time. The war had stopped at the door. A kind of temple. The very high windows, some beneath the intersection of the rafters, opened on a sky of a blue almost as intense as the blue of dawn. They had slept here, they had made love here, but without really knowing this brightness and this silence. Only now did they appreciate it.

The lights had not been working in the building for a long time. The electricity, moreover, was still cut off;

bombings had destroyed the lines, they had been told in Hirschenberg. Wasn't this reason enough not to accept the refugees? How could one keep order with so many people plunged in darkness? Paul promised himself to go to Ratisbon, in order to explain this to the American authorities.

'They'll tell you that the days are getting longer now,' said Lena. 'No, the simplest way out is a fire. By piling up the hay under one of the lofts . . .'

Paul pointed out that the building, old as it was, had a certain value. If, one day, the property should be sold . . . He lacked conviction. Lena sensed this.

'What does it matter? . . . Besides, there is heavy insurance. We stand to gain. . . . Are you going to help me?'

She walked towards the middle of the hall, Paul hesitated. A kind of amorous feeling came over him.

'Are you coming?'

He joined her. She had walked over to a large pile of straw in a corner, beneath the lowest of the platforms made by what was left of the upper stories. She stooped to find out how deep the straw was, for it was hard to see, here in the darker shadows. Paul reached towards Lena and leaned on her shoulders. Surprised, she looked around, but immediately lost her balance and fell into the hay. Paul lay down on top of her. Lena embraced him violently. They rolled towards the wall at the foot of which were heaped a great deal of ancient harness.

Never had Paul and Lena known such abandon in their love. They were half buried in straw and leather. Blind, disoriented, they experienced an acute kind of pleasure, a possession of one another that tasted of murder. After their desire had abated, they lay for a long time amidst the disorder in which the consummation of their love had

surprised them. They kept their eyes shut. Paul opened his first.

He saw, out of the corner of his eye, the rectangle of darkness outlined by the open door. It was not too dark outside to make out, beyond the meadow, the black mass of the forest. The Schreiwald. How childish these names were! No cry would ever ring out again in those woods. Once, just once, Paul had called out to Lena, when she had run away after the horse. She had come back to him quickly. Life had continued. What life? He always had the feeling, deep within him, of having experienced the whole truth, in one short moment that was gone for ever! Always the feeling, deep within him, of living on after his own death.

He sat up slightly; over there, in the shadows at the edge of the woods, a tiny flame had been ignited. It soon died: a smoker blowing out his match. Paul thought first of Fritz and then he said to himself that the former steward was not the only one who might spy on them. Lena's father might have come back, and be keeping watch before he dared show himself. Paul's presence there, which he had noticed earlier, no doubt, while it was still light, must have disturbed him. . . . But no, Lena's father was certainly dead. He would have come back before now. Once again a little flame glowed in the same place, but more briefly than before.

'There is someone in the woods,' Paul said to Lena.

She sat up but the flame did not reappear.

'Someone is watching us.' He rose and held his hand out to Lena to help her to her feet. 'No. We'll have to give up the idea of a fire. It would be very rash.'

'But later tonight they will be gone,' said Lena. 'It's probably just someone passing by. Let's go home now. We'll come back here around midnight. All right?'

She gave him an intense, slightly wild look. She laid her mouth against his. Once again Paul felt desire rising up within him. He broke away.

‘Yes.’

When they were in bed they made love again and did not wake up until morning. Shortly before noon the refugees arrived.

The convoy, made up of six tarpaulin-covered trucks, had stopped in front of the gate that led into the meadow. Their horns were blowing. Paul ran out to open it for them. In the first truck, next to the driver in uniform, he recognized the deputy mayor of Hirschenberg who asked him to step on the running-board. The six vehicles started moving again and drove up, one by one, to the large hall of the former stud farm.

‘Everything should have been made ready before their arrival,’ said Paul to the deputy mayor after they got down from the truck.

The official raised his hands to show that it was all beyond his control. An American NCO who had arrived in a different truck came up to them. He announced to Paul that a convoy of supplies would arrive that afternoon. He walked towards the door of the building. Paul opened it. As the American and the deputy mayor went indoors, he turned back towards the trucks. No sound of voices came from inside them; there was no way of telling that they were full of human beings. Why didn’t anyone let them out? Paul felt ashamed.

He went back to join the two men inside the building. He saw the scattered pile of hay and became angry at himself for not having allowed Lena to burn down the stud farm. He could imagine her in her room, not wanting to see anything and cursing him.

'We'll put the women on the upper stories, the men below. Go find their leader,' said the American to the deputy mayor.

The German came back accompanied by a tall, thin man of about fifty. He was dressed in an old black suit, the kind that peasants wear. The American introduced him to Paul and told the refugee that he would have to obey the Frenchman's orders.

'But,' said Paul, 'I understood that I would only be in charge of administration.'

'It is not a question of anything else,' replied the American. 'These people are not prisoners or soldiers. You simply have to maintain discipline and fairness.'

The building had to be emptied and cleaned before the supplies arrived in the afternoon. All the able-bodied men among the refugees would be put to work, while the women and children would settle in the meadow. The American NCO gave his directions to Paul. He soon became somewhat irritable; he expected suggestions, a certain initiative. Paul had to give in and co-operate. He told the leader of the group where to leave anything useful that was found in the building; he showed him a stall which could be used as a kitchen, since a stove was to be supplied. As for where to store the food . . .

'You will keep it in the house with you,' said the American. 'It's safer. These people are hungry.'

'Let me see them,' asked Paul with an authority that surprised him more than anyone.

The idea of organizing an abstract community, of making decisions about its life, of subjecting even a single person to his own desires without having seen his face, was abhorrent to him.

'Well then, have them get out,' said the American to the leader of the group.

The man went outside. One could hear the sides of the trucks being folded back. People started talking. There was laughter and one could feel the impact of bundles being thrown on the ground. Paul went out of the door. There did not appear to be as many as fifty persons. Except for five or six who were presumably discharged or disabled soldiers, the men were all quite old. They were dressed in the dark jackets and striped trousers which country people wear on Sundays. Only a few of them, more bourgeois in appearance, wore rumpled coats.

The women were more numerous, some withered and old, others in full-blown maturity. There were a half-dozen children, boys and girls of about ten to thirteen, and three older girls. Everyone carried suitcases, knapsacks, cardboard boxes tied with string full of knots. No one looked at Paul or the three men who stood near him. There had probably been so many people to obey, for the past few weeks, so many centres of relocation, reassembly, so many grim faces! Such a hierarchy of officials burdened with your welfare!

'And there isn't a sick person among them,' said the deputy mayor to Paul, with the pride of a salesman showing off a product. He turned towards the leader of the group. 'Isn't that so?' The man nodded.

Paul had just noticed that among the refugees milling about in the midst of their baggage, someone was staring at him intently. It was one of the girls. She was sitting on a suitcase and smoking a cigarette with affected gestures.

The leader had already picked out the team of workers who were to clean up the building. He decided that the three girls would join them and called first to the one who was smoking and looking at Paul. She stamped out her cigarette and came forward slowly, a disdainful look on

her face, tossing her blonde hair back over her shoulders. The deputy mayor handed Paul a sheaf of papers: the list of refugees, their names and origins. The drivers had started up the trucks again. The deputy mayor and the American were leaving.

Paul stood there motionless, the list in hand. His eyes fell on the first name: Heinrich Alhen, born May 18, 1891, at Kottbus, previous residence at . . . He felt a great sense of despondency. Some human beings had suddenly been thrust upon him. What human beings? Those who made up the banality of the German people to which he had been forcibly exposed for five years: a combination of ponderousness, zeal, and short-lived sentimentality, a people often given to fearful excess, but whose principal talent was that of being boring.

When the six trucks had disappeared, Paul went back to the house. He found Lena unruffled, showing no signs of nervousness. Paul told her of the new arrivals. She interrupted him.

'I saw them from the window: beggars. We will have to keep them in line, lock all the doors. None of them will be permitted to cross the courtyard. And they will have to feed and groom the horses.'

The leader of the refugees knocked at the door; he had come for orders. Lena questioned him dryly. He answered respectfully; his name was Wilhelm. Broken in to servility already, he gave only his first name. When Lena asked him where he came from, he started to describe the evacuation. Along the roads of Saxony, it had still been snowing in April . . .

'I'm not interested,' said Lena.

She repeated what she had just said to Paul: discipline was to be strict, the refugees confined to one place. In the meadow they were to keep within an area a hundred yards

square. They would take care of the horses. . . . Wilhelm nodded and left.

'Why are you so severe?' Paul asked Lena.

'One should either die or start a new life, a different life, as though there had been no defeat. Only in that way will it have been of any use. A fresh start. I loathe the victims of war who keep on living.'

These, however, kept on living. And because their life, to all appearances, was a rather vegetative one, it suggested a return to the tribal simplicities of the past. This was especially true of the meadow where most of the refugees spent each day, the weather having continued fair and warm. Laundry was spread out to dry on the grass, meals were cooked over open fires, for the stove provided by the Americans had proved inadequate.

The younger refugees lingered outdoors in the evening, and now and then, in the middle of the night, someone could still be heard coughing in the shadows. The camp cots brought by the truck were not numerous enough for everyone. They had been allotted to the aged and the children. The others slept on straw. The electricity had not been turned on.

The second night, Paul could not resist taking a look inside the building. Because of the darkness, he was able to slip inside without being noticed. Only the white-washed walls remained faintly illuminated. The harness hanging there had not been removed. Beneath them were the vague outlines of recumbent bodies.

A man was complaining in a loud voice: someone had stolen his knife. He must have been speaking for some time now, for he alluded to certain incidents which Paul did not understand. He gathered that this theft was not the first to be committed since the arrival of the refugees.

The man, whose anger seemed to be growing gradually more violent, as though while he talked he discovered new proofs of iniquity, warned that the crime would not go unpunished. Just wait until they were all out of the camp again! On second thoughts, this eventuality must have seemed to him too remote or too uncertain to lend weight to his threat. He went on to say that those whom he suspected of theft, without mentioning any names, might find themselves in trouble right here in the camp. The Frenchman, and his superiors, the Americans, would surely be interested in learning of the political past of a few of the refugees. In this way the atmosphere of the camp could be made more wholesome. . . .

'Filthy swine!' shouted a woman from one of the galleries.

Below, some of the men also raised their voices: anyone responsible for even the slightest betrayal would pay for it, dearly. After all, weren't they fellow countrymen, shouldn't they stick together in hardship and defeat? And besides, most of those who were now spitting on the government had profited from it handsomely. Of course they had not been open about it, had not compromised themselves, had let others take all the risks. Voices rose in accord from all corners of the hall:

'That's right! Quite right!'

People were stirring, making the straw rustle beneath them.

The man who had been complaining of theft was losing ground.

'Just the same, I'm not going to sit around and be robbed!' he cried.

Someone must have risen and gone over to him, for Paul heard another, harsher voice, coming from the same spot.

'There are no thieves around here! And what's more, if you talk to the Frenchman, do you understand, if you tell him! . . .'

'Let me go!' cried the man.

'You see what I mean, don't you?' continued the other, his voice muffled, as though it came through gritted teeth.

'Kill him, so we can all go to sleep!'

This was the broken voice of an old woman. Laughter rang out, mixed with shouts, 'All right!' 'Enough!'

High above, someone struck a match. The flame lit up burlap curtains hanging every which way, some half-raised, and partitions made of stacked crates and other motley materials.

'You up there, watch out for fire!'

Darkness closed in again.

' . . . no thieves, do you understand!'

'Ask Schleier,' said the man, already less afraid. 'The other day it was his pen and his money. Isn't that so, Schleier?'

Schleier did not answer.

'He's not there, he's gone out,' said someone, probably the man in the next bed.

'Gone out indeed!' cried a woman from the first loft, laughing. 'Come look behind this curtain. He and Maria are in the midst of . . .'

An old woman began yelping with delight.

The laughter started up again. On the platform where the woman had spoken, there was a noisy scuffle.

'Let go of that!' It was a young girl's voice. 'Let go!' She was probably referring to the curtain.

'She scratched me,' shrieked the woman.

'He's gone,' said another.

Behind all the voices, Paul heard the sound of someone running downstairs, apparently in bare feet, for he could

only hear the creaking of the steps. Paul retreated towards the door, so as not to be discovered, but in the darkness he bumped into a crate. The man, who was also trying to get out, was upon him. The man stood motionless. His face was very close to Paul's and he must have recognized him. Paul could hear him breathing. He stepped around the crate and slipped outside through the half-open door.

8

He did not go back to the house but towards the gate at the edge of the meadow. Lena would not worry where he had gone; she would think that he had stayed behind to settle problems of organization with Wilhelm. Why hadn't the leader of the refugees intervened earlier, to put an end to the commotion? The sound must certainly have reached him in the little room where he slept at the end of the corridor. He must be as involved as the others. Was his obsequiousness towards Lena and Paul not proof enough of his corruption?

Paul went past the gate and walked along the edge of the woods behind the fence. It was here that, a few days before, a man had betrayed his presence by striking a match or a cigarette lighter, the place where Fritz probably hid to spy on them. Paul would have liked to run into him. This desire, which made him angry at himself, was no doubt a reaction to the disgust he had felt inside the camp. He had seen one of the faces of peace, the peace which was only an accident of war, which changed nothing in men's lives, which simply replaced vileness of murder by the vileness of staying alive. Somewhere in the world there were surely other kinds of peace, but it was here, in this country which had dedicated itself to war, that he would have liked to witness the birth of light. The

guiltiest nation could reveal the most about man.

Hunger—the rations allotted in the camp were very meagre—the confinement, the enforced promiscuity, boredom . . . yes, he was all too familiar with the reasons why he should have been more indulgent. But after all, wasn't peace the time to rise above one's narrow condition, to seek the highest compensations?

The people who came here, after a blind exodus, were seeking tangible, material rewards. They still clung to the kind of wisdom in which the only way to overcome error is to profit from it. Faith was dead. It had proved to be unprofitable. They never considered that the particular faith which had aroused them so dangerously might have been false, and that others might help them redeem themselves. No. For them, ideals, dreams, everything of the spirit had been defeated along with the Germany of flags, eagles, and torches. It was a form of justice; they had been brought back to earth again, to a sense of reality. And reality, as everyone knew it, was manufactured in America; they had made an ocean of it, enough for all of humanity: a million excellent pocketknives, twenty cents each, for refugees who had been dispossessed or robbed; thirty-cent fountain pens, and thousands of other conveniences. . . . This wave was being awaited with a certain impatience, as Paul had just discovered.

In spite of his vagaries, in spite of his windy solemnity, there was truth in what Fritz said. From high on the wooded hillside, he had seen a landscape stricken by death, and dazzling. The truth of silence. It was necessary to accept a great deal of silence before being able to see, as though at the end of a long, smooth strand, against the primordial grey of the sea, beneath a sky barely calm after the storm, in a light that was slightly leaden, though blinding, the slow return of man. He had been so far

away! For the last few years, there had been no sight of him. In the end, there had been nothing but darkness, with flashes of lightning, waves breaking, the call of birds falling obliquely, their wings outspread. . . .

Paul found himself surrounded by trees. The visions of shorelines and sea which had gone through his mind remained before his eyes. He shook himself and then began to whistle, to attract Fritz if he were in the woods nearby. There was no answer. He had to go back. All of a sudden he felt no desire to go home. He would have liked to keep walking until morning, feeling his way in the darkness, dreaming of slightly grey seas, until dawn rose on an empty plain, stretching far as the eye could see.

When he arrived at the house, Lena was waiting for him, sitting beside a lamp in the living-room.

‘What happened? There was so much shouting! It only just stopped.’

Paul admitted that he had been in the woods. The commotion must have become worse after he left the building. Lena looked at him with surprise but did not ask him what he had been doing in the woods. He went to bed, suddenly overcome by exhaustion. Tomorrow he would investigate, he would question Wilhelm. . . .

‘It was all because of Maria, everything that happened,’ said Wilhelm. ‘Schleier and Holtmann fought with leather straps. They took them down off the walls. Schleier used the end that had an iron buckle. He wounded Holtmann on the cheek. Before that, everything was calm.’

‘No,’ replied Paul. ‘There had been some thefts.’

‘What thefts?’ cried Wilhelm. ‘Who told you?’

Paul remained silent. Wilhelm started towards the door. Paul called him back.

‘Who is Maria?’

Wilhelm gave a caustic description of her. Blonde hair over her shoulders, a particular way of looking at people. . . . Paul remembered the girl who had been sitting on her suitcase, smoking, the day they arrived.

'Did Schleier tell you about the thefts?' asked Wilhelm. Paul shook his head.

'In any case, it's a lie,' Wilhelm went on. 'They lose everything in the straw and immediately raise the devil, to put the blame on us.' He lowered his voice. 'A few of them are communists. I could give you names.'

'I don't want to hear,' Paul said curtly.

The interview was over. Wilhelm left the room with considerable dignity. Paul watched him go from the window. He saw him go back to join the refugees in the meadow. Fires smoked beneath iron kettles and lent a blue cast to the morning air. The sun had already dried the dew. Sitting on the grass, the women chatted and watched their children play, not far from where the four horses were grazing. The men stood in little groups, facing the woods. One of them was alone. He paced up and down along the wall of the building. Wilhelm stopped next to one of the groups and, a moment later, the men turned their heads towards the one who was alone. Then they resumed their conversation.

Paul left the house and started towards the former stud farm; he should see this Maria who had caused all the disturbance. He knew perfectly well that this was an imaginary duty, that he was simply curious about the girl. The refugees watched him cross the corner of the meadow between the gate and the building. The man who was alone stood still for a moment, looking at him. Paul thought he recognized Schleier. He pushed open the door. There was no one in the main part of the barn. Paul walked over to the stairs. The evening before, while he

stood in the shadows listening, he had located precisely where Maria's exclamations had come from: the entrance to the lower loft. Curtains of old, mildew-spotted canvas, burlap bags sewed together, hung on wires, hiding the row of beds and leaving only a narrow passageway which dropped off into space. Behind the curtains, other partitions had apparently been improvised, for coming out from the wall one could see wires and wooden poles hung with tattered cloth, even pieces of cardboard. Paul heard a muffled laugh.

'Maria Freiberg?' he called out. He had looked on the list; there was only one Maria who was eighteen years old.

'Right here,' replied a lilting voice.

He couldn't find where the curtains opened. A section of canvas was pulled aside. A little girl of about twelve looked at Paul and smiled. She was missing two front teeth.

'Here,' she said, still smiling and bowing to him with an expression of mockery.

Paul went into the cubicle. Maria was stretched out on a straw mattress, her hands behind her head. She used a knapsack as a pillow.

'Do you have a cigarette?'

Paul gave her one. She took a few puffs and started to laugh.

'I thought you didn't allow smoking inside the building . . .'

It was not his idea, but Wilhelm's. He did not say this. He shrugged his shoulders.

'What happened here last night?'

'Nothing,' said Maria. 'They get ideas. Everyone's nerves are on edge.'

She was sitting up and leaning on one elbow. The little girl stood nearby and watched her smoke. Maria offered

her the cigarette. The child took two puffs, one after the other and gave it back.

'I have the impression that you haven't exactly helped matters,' said Paul.

Maria looked at him with the same derisive expression as the little girl when he came in.

'Who, me? You haven't either.'

Why did he keep everyone so confined? Why were the meals so skimpy, the sleeping conditions so wretched, the discipline so strict?

'It's not up to me,' said Paul.

She went on enumerating all the complaints, not bitterly, but in a kind of cheerful high spirits. Paul was concerned, but he soon realized that Maria was not pleading the cause of the community. It was she who could not swallow certain foods, she who was not able to sleep on straw, she who could not bear the crowded conditions.

'I sympathize with you,' said Paul, 'but this still does not explain certain things . . .'

She interrupted him. Yes, it explained everything. He couldn't have any idea of how lonely, how sad she was, sometimes! She now had no choice but to lie here all day; her dress was so worn that it was falling apart. She turned over. The material was torn on her hip. Her skin showed through. She had no underclothes left.

'Look!'

She pulled her dress way up. She wore a pair of pants crudely fashioned out of rough muslin.

'Cut out of an old flour sack.'

She had long, slightly tanned thighs and a gently-hollowed abdomen.

'You never would have realized things had reached this point.'

Paul looked away. The little girl was smiling.

'I can send her out, if you like,' said Maria, lowering her voice. 'She won't say anything.'

'You're crazy!' said Paul. He tried to conceal his distress. 'Why do you do such things?'

Maria sat up.

'I want to get out of here! I'm bored to death. Help me get out!'

'I haven't the authority,' replied Paul. 'But, after all, nothing could be easier; slip out of one of the back windows. No one will follow you.'

'What would I do, without any money? If I had a little money, I could look for work.'

Paul did not answer.

'Listen to me,' Maria continued. She waved to the little girl who ran out between the curtains before Paul could hold her back. '. . . Don't you want to sit down next to me?'

Paul shook his head. Maria seemed crushed. She looked at Paul and then slowly began to unbutton the bodice of her dress. There was a questioning look in her eyes, as though, at any moment, she expected Paul to make her stop. She kept on, button by button, but feeling that victory was still uncertain, she held her breath, and moved more and more slowly, stifling the joy which already showed in her eyes.

Paul could feel himself losing ground. Maria rose, never taking her eyes from his. The opening in her dress now revealed the naked curve of her breast. Standing in front of Paul, she was undoing the last buttons. He grabbed her hand and held it still.

'Not here. They saw me come in.'

'Then where?'

'I'll tell you later.'

He pulled back the curtain and ran downstairs. Outside, he saw the little girl waiting in the sun. She looked at him, squinting, her gap-toothed mouth half-open. It was not quite a smile: something similar to the worn expression on antique sculptures, bereft of the artist's original intention, as obscure in meaning as eroded rocks, or the faces of slaughtered animals.

He passed by and kept walking, indifferent to whether the other refugees, out in the meadow, had turned to watch him. Yes, he would make love with Maria, even (and why not?) in front of the little girl. They would make love against the earth, in the darkness. He would forget himself, would plunge with her to the depths of oblivion. Was this not the simplest way to cast aside the world which was taking shape again, in peacetime, with all its old rivalries, ambition, hatred, and petty machinations? Always to go deeper into madness. Maria's lightly tanned legs, the little girl's laugh: he could imagine this in the night of the woods; he could see himself lying on the ground, debased, happy, as though asleep . . .

When he came into the living-room, Lena and Wilhelm were talking. Why had the refugee leader come back?

'What did you say to her?' Lena asked Paul.

Wilhelm, too, stood waiting for an answer. They had probably been discussing Maria just as he came in. Paul made a noncommittal gesture.

'Oh, I scolded her, gave her advice . . .'

'She doesn't care!' cried Wilhelm with a note of conviction that was unusual for him. 'What do you think I've been doing all along? At first, though, there was only Holtmann.'

'What is he to her?'

Wilhelm told the whole story: Holtmann, discharged at forty after being wounded twice, and Maria, were both

part of a group of refugees who fled the Glogau region, on the Oder River. Maria was the daughter of a miller. Her father had been drafted and there had been no word from him for months. At the approach of the Red Army, Maria and her mother fled with other peasants, having managed to acquire a horse and cart. After a two-week journey on the roads, in the rain and the snow, the caravan met another body of refugees fleeing from eastern Saxony. Wilhelm had been among them.

Due to the congested roads, they often had to wait for a long time in one place. One day, they stopped next to some freight yards. Open carloads of sugar beets stood on the siding. Desperate for food, a few of the refugees had climbed the fences and scaled the sides of the cars. Maria's mother had joined them. She had already thrown several sugar beets down to Maria, who had remained on the ground below, when another trainload of produce backed up against the couplings of the freight car to take it in tow. The pilferers leapt to the ground and dispersed. Less agile, Maria's mother had held on until the cars collided.

There was a violent impact. She let go, fell backwards, and struck her head on one of the iron spikes that lined the track. The railway workers took her to the town hospital. The next day, when she regained consciousness, she found Maria at her bedside. With all the strength she had left, she begged her to keep going; the Russians were close by. The doctor himself urged Maria to obey.

She left. Feeling sorry for her, Holtmann offered to drive her cart. His own wife, an accomplished farm woman, would be able to drive their horses herself. Afraid of sleeping alone, Maria soon took to sharing the couple's bed, beneath the tarpaulin roof of their cart. Then Holtmann's wife had to exchange places with her. The woman

heard everything. She could no longer sleep. Her hands were swollen with frostbite and gave her constant pain. One morning she set off alone, in Maria's cart, going in the opposite direction from the caravan.

As soon as the refugees reached the American lines and gradually found shelter in improvised camps, or more often, in barns, Maria began sleeping with other men, in exchange for food and cigarettes. Then she took up with Schleier, a moody fellow. People said that ever since he had been wounded at Kursk, he had fits of insanity. Holtmann was justly repelled by him. He broke off all relations with Maria, but his jealousy hung on. How could it have been otherwise, with the girl's constant provocation?

'She should be isolated from the others,' said Wilhelm in conclusion. 'Otherwise I won't answer any longer for order in this camp.'

'Let's discuss the order around here!' cried Paul. 'Those thefts . . .'

'We are not talking about thefts, right now,' said Lena. 'This girl must be prevented from being a nuisance.'

'A nuisance to whom?'

Paul's question seemed to disconcert Lena. She did not answer right away. She walked slowly towards the back of the room and then stood still, with her back turned.

'I don't know. . . . Defeat shouldn't be carried too far.'

She had admitted it: Maria's conduct was degrading to Germany. Paul began to laugh.

'It's no defeat to her!'

Lena turned around.

'I don't care what you call it! There is dignity to be maintained, even in poverty. There is a way of living, even when one is free! I don't want to hear any more

about her, do you understand? Do you? Not here, not in my house!

'I have an idea!' cried Wilhelm. 'I'll put her in the stable. She'll be alone there. . . . I doubt if the horses . . .' he added, laughing.

'That's fine; put her in the stable,' said Lena. 'A very wholesome atmosphere for her.'

Paul was about to protest; without his agreement, Lena and Wilhelm had no right. He restrained himself, however. There was something attractive to him in Wilhelm's plan. He realized that the idea of Maria's giving herself to men was loathsome to him. No, he himself would never love her. He would save her, punish her, force her into solitary confinement. He could imagine her in the close, prodigious world of the horses, in the darkness, among the vague rumblings of truth. He could see her, with her long, slightly-tanned legs, her blonde hair, and her smile; he could see her spangled with sex and weeping in the shadows of the horses.

'What do you think?' Wilhelm asked him.

It would be wrong to agree too readily. He shrugged his shoulders and went over to the window. Everything was growing so confused in his mind! Fires were still burning in the meadow. Now the refugees were lying down in the grass. Was Maria among them? . . .

'Do whatever you like,' he said suddenly to Wilhelm.

Wilhelm started towards the door. He stopped.

'She is the kind who will put up a struggle. But I won't have any trouble getting help. Do I have your permission?'

'Of course!' said Lena, before Paul could answer. 'Be firm. Without violence, naturally.'

Wilhelm went out. Lena stood by the table, saying nothing. With her forefinger, she slowly traced inter-

locking circles over the varnished wood. Paul followed the motion of her finger with his eyes. Finally Lena looked up and smiled, as though a sign, a revelation, had appeared in the meanderings of her finger, with its rather long, pointed nail now and then screeching against the wood.

Paul engrossed himself in reading until the middle of the afternoon. The Wittgenstein library contained a motley assortment, among them a copy of the *Phantasiestücke* of Hoffmann which Paul had already read three times. He was making an exercise out of it; his German was still stiff. To force himself to concentrate, against the constant intrusion of the incident with Maria, he read half-out-loud. Lena was probably sleeping or sewing in her room.

When, tired of reading, Paul got up to look out of the window, the horses were no longer in the meadow. They were usually left there to graze until evening. He realized the reason why: Wilhelm had shut Maria in the stable without delay, and to avoid having to hold the door open later, he had put the horses in at the same time. The little gap-toothed girl dallied about the door of the stable. At one point she leaned over to pick something off the ground. Someone must have called her. One of the women sitting on the grass had turned in her direction. The little girl ran over, throwing behind her whatever she had picked up. Paul never knew what it was. Nothing, probably: a stone, a piece of wood.

In his eyes, everything took on a disturbing significance, even the way the refugees sat together in the meadow, three by three, four by four, like people on a beach, facing the sea, on grey days when no one gets undressed or goes swimming. The sun, in fact, had just hidden behind some clouds.

‘What am I doing here?’ Paul asked himself. Vehement memories began to come back to him, of France, of a village he knew whose houses were of the same grey shade as the walls of the barn at this hour. The days there had sometimes been tedious, but he remembered this tedium with nostalgia. It was about to rain and, whenever it rained, even a fine, almost invisible mist, the village came to life. Everything started up again. People went into the houses, holding their hands over their heads. Others waited in vestibules which opened on to the street, paved with large damp flagstones. That was peace. What more did Paul want?

Of course, these same cheerful souls who went into their houses, smiling, saying, ‘Even so, you do get wet . . .’ hated and lied. They hated, they lied, by themselves in the rain, and when they thought no one was looking at them in the deserted street, strained expressions would appear on their faces. There, in these faces, one could read the whole world in its hatred and lies, the whole world kindling another war.

Still, one had to believe in the rain, the willows, people who got wet and laughed about it. . . . Paul said to himself that he should write to the few friends he had in Paris to remind them of his existence. He thought that he should also be concerned with putting his military status in order. A foothold, all he needed was a foothold! The reason why he was so disturbed by everything that was happening here was the state of complete detachment in which he found himself. Organized society, while crushing you, offers support. The first thing tomorrow, he would go to Ratisbon with Lena. They could certainly get a ride in a military truck, from Hirschenberg. At Ratisbon, he would go to the authorities and find out the various ways of returning to France. With Lena? With Lena. They would

get married. They would live in Paris. He would go to work.

He stayed indoors until nightfall. He was becoming "uninvolved". Towards evening, however, at the window, he kept an eye on the door to the stable. They couldn't starve Maria, after all! Lena came in and surprised him.

'These refugees seem to fascinate you. One might almost think that captivity becomes a vice.'

Paul did not answer. Lena was only half mistaken. It was not captivity but the truth to be found in adversity that had become his vice. But Lena's words were enough to erase any illusions he had been building up for himself. He wouldn't go to Ratisbon. He had no desire to go. He would wait. Wait for the light. Beyond that, he knew nothing. He kept repeating to himself that he would wait for the light. A strange emotion had come over him. It became stranger when they went up to their room after dinner. Lena went to bed, while Paul paced back and forth in the darkness. Finally he sat down on the bed.

'I am going to let that girl out of the stable.'

'That's what I was waiting for,' said Lena, without anger. 'Go stay in the stable with her, if you like.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because I would accept it. That way, you could hold a defiled German in your arms. You need to. You need that revenge. With me, you never had it.'

'What on earth is going through your mind? That's not what I want!'

'I know what you meant, and what you haven't said. You want communion too. If you go and see her, we can all be brothers again. Make love to her,' she continued, with a kind of fervour. 'You can even bring her here tonight, if you want to. I won't say anything. I'll be kind

to her. She is paying, for me. Why aren't all German girls like her? That would be justice, wouldn't it?' She sat up abruptly in bed. 'Go get her. I want to see her. I was wrong this afternoon, when I wanted to put her in the stable. I want to talk to her. You can kiss her in front of me. She is beautiful . . .'

'You are going crazy!' cried Paul.

'She is beautiful,' Lena continued. 'You can kiss her in front of me. I will give you to her. It has to be that way. A whole lot of people in this country, including me, are missing the chance to make something out of defeat, isn't that right?'

'I never said so.'

He was deeply disturbed. His heart was beating violently. But no, that still wasn't quite the truth. Close, perhaps.

'No, you never said so,' Lena went on. 'But I know it's true. Afterwards, you'll see, we'll love one another even more. Everything will have been exorcised. We will start all over again, this time from the beginning. Go get her, please!'

She started to laugh. She didn't believe what she was saying. Paul wanted to hit her. He went out of the room as fast as he could. From the storeroom on the ground floor, he made up a package of what, in this period of near-starvation in Germany, constituted the most valuable currency: instant coffee, chocolate, soap, and cigarettes. Each week, the American Service Corps truck brought Paul and Lena two large bundles of these supplies. They couldn't use them up. Lena was putting away a reserve.

Carrying the package, Paul went out of the house. Night soothed his spirit. What if Lena meant what she said? But no, she was laughing. She guessed Paul's desires, and amused herself by finding a perverse expression for

them, pretending it was an outlet for him, a sublimation.

He opened the stable door and walked right in. He had brought the lantern. It shone first on the horses who stood side by side and turned all together to look at him. Where was Maria? He discovered a pile of hay next to which lay a knapsack and a metal plate. He turned around. Maria was less than three yards away. She was looking at him, terrified. She must have been crying. Her eyes were swollen. She was ugly, all of a sudden.

‘Why did you have me put in here? They dragged me in like a thief. Why?’

There was a catch in her voice.

‘Let’s not talk about it any more,’ said Paul. ‘I came to let you out. Here . . .’

He laid the package which he had brought down on the stone floor of the passageway and unfolded the paper. Maria remained standing, next to him, staring straight ahead. It seemed as though she were trying very hard to take deep breaths.

‘Was it so that you could come see me more easily?’ she asked, with an intonation in her voice which suddenly betrayed pride. ‘I didn’t understand. I didn’t think that you would come. No, I didn’t think you would.’

She leaned over towards the contents of the package, turned each box over slowly, one after the other, then opened a package of cigarettes. She took one, asked Paul for a light and sat down on the ground. She drew all the supplies close to her and again looked at each one of them, examining them on all sides and putting them down carefully.

‘Will you send me back there, afterwards?’

‘No. You are going to leave. I’ll show you the way to the road. In two hours you will be in Hirschenberg. In

exchange for this, you can have a dress, shoes, a little money. The trains must be starting to run again. You could go home.'

'The Russians are there.'

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

'Do as you like.'

Maria had opened one of the cardboard boxes and was biting on a piece of chocolate, in between puffs on the cigarette. She looked up at Paul and smiled.

'It won't be very comfortable on the straw . . .'

'That's not what I came for,' said Paul. 'Get your things together, we are going to leave.'

Maria wrapped up the boxes in the paper and got up, holding the package in her hands.

'I'll put them in my knapsack.'

She was not smiling any more. Her voice was somewhat dejected.

'Light the way for me. . . . Could you let me keep the lantern? I am going to be afraid, all alone, at night.'

Paul did not answer. Maria fastened her knapsack by the light of the lantern, nervously.

'Just the same, I could have stayed here perfectly well.'

'No,' said Paul.

'Because of Schleier?' asked Maria. 'He is in love with me, I know, but nothing has happened between us, I swear it! He got some kind of wound in the war. I don't think he is really a man any more. He used to come to talk to me, at night. He knows a lot of things. The others resent it. He doesn't think the way they do. He said he would have stayed in the east, if they hadn't forced him to leave . . . You understand, I used him as a protection against Holtmann who kept bothering me just because, two or three times . . . Of course I was wrong, but I was so lonely . . .'

'That's not why I am making you leave,' said Paul.

'You don't love me; that's the real reason.'

'No, it's something else entirely.'

He had gone towards the door of the stable, and held it open. Maria went in front of him.

'I don't understand,' she said.

'There is nothing to understand.'

How could he explain? He knew what lay ahead for Maria, down in the valley: prostitution, the black market, two girls lying in the back of a covered truck, with a soldier keeping watch outside, one hand holding the flap of canvas open, smoking. Night all around, mud on the roads, or else the heat of summer rising from the earth. A soldier jumping down from the truck and asking the other for a light, greedily. The end of the line in Europe, the end of the line in History. That was where Maria had to go.

Paul knew that he could not take the place of this degradation, this suffering. They existed, at least, in a kind of justice, there where she was going. If Maria had stayed on the stud farm, Paul would have made love to her. He would have degraded himself with her just as Lena, perhaps, had hoped. He would have found pleasure in it, but soon he would have begun to worry about the girl's salvation. Too cheap a way to reach the light. Such hasty redemptions would never lead to peace.

They had crossed the meadow, Maria slightly bent beneath her knapsack and not saying a word, Paul opened the gate and showed her the way.

'After the woods you will cross a plateau. On the other side is a slope and at the bottom you will find the road. Turn right. From there it is four kilometres to Hirschenberg.'

Maria hesitated before starting out.

‘What if I meet someone?’

‘Good God, you’ve had enough experience!’ said Paul, forcing himself to laugh. ‘If it’s a man, there’s no problem.’

‘I’m afraid,’ said Maria. ‘I really could have stayed here.’

‘Afraid? You, a German girl!’

Maria looked down at the road, her head bowed. Paul was longing to stroke her hair, to kiss her, to hold her close. He was purified of all desire. He suffered for her, with her. He forced himself to be cruel.

‘All right, I’ll go,’ said Maria in a low voice. ‘Good-bye.’

‘Goodbye, Maria.’

She set off along the road. Paul immediately turned his back on her, closed the gate and started running across the meadow. He ran as fast as he could. If only he could keep going like this, all night, through the woods, through the fields! He had reached the courtyard. He stopped and walked into the house with composure, after having shut all the doors carefully behind him.

9

When he told Lena that he had sent Maria away, she said nothing and simply shrugged her shoulders. The next morning Wilhelm strode into the house without even knocking. He was in a state of wild excitement. How could Maria have escaped? Paul explained.

‘But the others will be furious! Many of them would like to be free. They won’t forgive you for having been partial to that little bitch! And as for the Americans . . .’

‘I am quite indifferent to what others have to say. I have done, and will go on doing, what I think is right.’

This tone seemed to impress Wilhelm. He was silent for a moment.

'Let's see,' he said more calmly. 'We could work out a different story. No one knows yet that Maria has escaped. We could say that she managed to pick the lock on the stable door. A lot of people knew how weak it was.'

'I don't see the point of lying.'

'But it's your responsibility!' cried Lena. 'The Americans will be furious, too. They are capable of refusing to give you the papers you need to stay here.'

Paul was about to reply, 'Well then I'll go,' but he discovered that he did not want to go. He walked towards the back of the room.

'If you feel so strongly about it . . .'

'Yes, I think it's a good idea,' said Wilhelm. He continued effusively:

'It is in the best interests of both of us for things to run smoothly here. This was simply an unfortunate little incident; the girl was a thief, among other things. We had to keep her apart from the rest. She escaped, that's all. We did what we could.'

'She was a thief?'

'Of course,' said Wilhelm. 'What do you think?'

'Have you any proof?'

'No, but she's gone; that's proof enough.'

And so everything was settled. Here and there in the meadow, the refugees' fires were smoking in the sunshine. The horses grazed. The children were playing and the whole scene still evoked the innocent joys of a nomadic tribe, with its gossiping women sitting on the grass, busy, turning this way and that, to watch a child, a pot which refused to boil, or a lone man who kept pacing in front of the large barn of the stud farm.

Weary of this scene, Paul would often escape into the

woods. He had learned to ride. He seemed to have a natural skill for it. Lena, who was an experienced rider, accompanied him at first but then she lost interest; Paul saw too much in these places where everything looked alike. Alone, Paul felt that he enjoyed his rides more. He chose the most patient horse and let it take him slowly through the bushes, bending back each branch, penetrating the forest twig by twig.

He was able to find the fern-covered spot where Fritz had said he spent every day. Fritz was not anywhere around, but Paul did not care. He was just curious about the different kind of undergrowth in this part of the woods. He tried to find the reason for it. The terrain sloped into a little dell which probably held the moisture. But no, he knew nothing about it. He tried vainly to identify the other plants, some of which bore minuscule white flowers. They brought him a strange, slightly melancholy happiness. Around him, the shadows were growing greener. He was annoyed, however, at his ignorance. Here it was, June! The grass should already have been cut, in the meadow and on the two tenant farms. All that hay lost! How would they feed the horses next winter? He thought of organizing a team of refugees to cut the fields. Had he the right to do this?

These thoughts led him to speculate about the rôle he would play if he remained on the stud farm. Lena and he would have to wrest a living from the property, to see that the land was cultivated properly. Paul knew that he was incapable of it. In the first place, there was not enough help. He felt useless, living without a job, and found it distasteful. He had to admit it to himself; Germany, for him, was a refuge. It was easy to be inspired when riding through the woods, on a level with the branches of the trees, and to feel a sense of purity while

contemplating the plants with their minuscule white flowers stirring lightly in the shadows: wood sorrel, the flower of sloth! He said this to himself every time he felt like going for a ride. However, with no work to keep him on the stud farm, he would wander into the woods almost every day.

The summer was now full blown. Storms came, one after the other. One evening, in the woods, Paul was caught in a sudden thunderstorm. He tied his horse to a tree trunk and took shelter beneath the branches of a pine. Torrents of rain fell in grey curtains between the trees. Now and then a flash of lightning would reveal their streaming bark. At the height of the storm, as the wind rose and the pine tree at the foot of which Paul was crouching began to creak, a horse, lighter in colour than his own, the rider bent close to its neck, went by at a fast trot, not far away. Paul thought he recognized Fritz. He called to him but a roar of thunder drowned out his voice. Paul thought afterwards that he might have been dreaming. He was amused to think of what Fritz would have said about the storm, had he been given the chance. He, too, would probably have told of a rider who appeared, clinging to his horse's neck, and suddenly vanished. Fritz would not have lied. He never had lied. It was just that he was familiar with that second reality of which Paul, now and then, had a glimmer. . . . That evening, as he rode across the meadow on his way home, Wilhelm ran to meet him. Schleier had hanged himself.

They put his body in the stable, on a pile of hay, without ceremony. It was the same hay on which Maria had slept, during her captivity. Paul refused to see any significance in this, unlike Lena, who missed no opportunity to talk about the girl again. No, except for the special circumstances surrounding the death of Schleier,

no doubt demoralized by a cruel injury, the truth was that the refugees would eventually all perish of boredom, in one way or the other.

Paul told this to the deputy mayor in Hirschenberg, where he went on horseback the following morning. The deputy, who had received Paul with a certain coldness, showed his annoyance.

'Instead of complaining, you should be accounting for some of the unfortunate incidents that have arisen! Everything is in a state of confusion in your camp, I can see that. A week ago, our police arrested a girl who had escaped from there. She was selling American military supplies on the black market. I am going to telephone Ratisbon so that the Americans can have a look in your . . .'

He swallowed his words. Paul knew what he meant.

'I will not be spoken to in that tone of voice!' he cried.

Everything would start all over again. The light was almost the same as on that already distant day in the small prisoner-of-war camp. The deputy would slap Paul. He looked around for something to strike with. On the desk, he noticed a large paperweight, a piece of mountain rock, with the imprint of a fossil shell . . .

'Let's forget what I said. I am somewhat nervous just now,' replied the official, in a contrite tone of voice and without looking at Paul. 'I must call Ratisbon, however, don't you agree? The suicide . . .'

Paul nodded. The deputy picked up the telephone. Communications were still slow. Looking down at the blotter, the official kept the receiver held to his ear. He suddenly seemed very old. His hands were veined and yellow, his face full of red blotches. He looked up.

'How many packages do they give you a month?' he asked in a low voice. 'Two? Four? Don't worry, this is

between us. I'll tell you right now that I get three.'

'That's about what we get,' Paul replied, feeling awkward.

'But what kind?' pursued the official, becoming more interested. 'I don't mean the weight, they are all the same. But the contents . . . Hello, *Fraülein*? Give me department eighteen, Sergeant Jackson. . . . Yes, some of them have nothing but canned meat; just one tin of coffee and a chocolate bar. And that powdered milk that takes up so much room! . . . No, I'm still here. . . . Yes, Sergeant Jackson, please. This is the mayor's office in Hirschenberg. . . . It's about the refugees!' He looked up at Paul. 'I've heard that some of them contain two tins of coffee and two chocolate bars. Have you had any like that?'

Paul did not have to answer.

'What I'm calling about?' replied the deputy mayor into the phone. 'There has been a death, a suicide. . . . Of course I realize that he can't be disturbed simply for that. But he told me to keep an eye on the state of morale. . . . The denazification department? Are they the ones? . . . Everything of a psychological nature? . . . Very well, put them on. I'll wait . . .' He put his hand over the receiver. 'You see,' he said to Paul, 'I don't smoke, myself. So five packages three times a month, that's as good as cash.' He began to laugh. 'Even that peanut butter of theirs doesn't go begging! Do you like it?'

Paul rose. It was late. He had to go back to the camp. He left everything else in the deputy mayor's hands. He went out, leaving him with the telephone still at his ear.

The next day they buried Schleier at the edge of the woods. Paul had chosen the spot himself; behind the large barn. He wanted the tomb in an inconspicuous place. The men carved a birch cross. The lack of a coffin shocked the refugees. One of them shook his fist almost beneath

Paul's nose. 'War be damned!' He put everything into this imprecation, but Paul was unmoved. All this could have been very dramatic. But these people did not have a gift for it. The silence, the cool wind, the black pines, against this background, everything took place without incident: a well-run war, an unpoetic peace. But, still, there was 'something' as Fritz would say, a truth. Paul thought that, as far as truth went, he had chosen the most difficult country. But when he did find it, what light there would be in the woods, over the fields! What light within himself!

Two days later the Americans arrived. There were three officers whom Paul had never seen before. They carried a bundle of papers. They asked for a table to be set for them, in the open air, opposite the barn of the stud farm. When it was ready, they laid their papers on it, along with several packs of cigarettes, and then sat down. The refugees began to line up in front of them, in alphabetical order. Wilhelm called their names one by one. They sat down. One of the Americans pointed to the cigarettes on the table. Most of the men took one. The women shook their heads, smiling, holding their hands clasped between their knees.

Paul did not take part in the questioning. From the living-room window, he would sometimes see one of the Americans who wore gold-rimmed glasses raising his hand and waving it in the air, laughing. The man (or woman) being interviewed would then sway back and forth in his chair, his head bowed, with a kind of timid happiness on his face. Another officer was filling up large sheets of paper. He held one hand to his brow, a cigarette burning between his fingers, to shade his eyes from the sun. The inquiry took over three hours. Then the Americans, exhausted, their papers under their arms, went into the living-room where Lena had prepared them

a meal. The cold, acid wine which she served first pleased them.

'As a whole, you know, the minds of your people don't seem deeply affected,' said the American with the gold-rimmed glasses, who had collapsed into an armchair. 'Here and there, perhaps, a touch of Nazi-ism. Or "Prussianism" to be more accurate—it is harder to eradicate the origins, of course. Yes, slight sado-masochist tendencies, of the militaristic sort. . . . Above all, they lack a spiritual focus. All their values have crumbled beneath them: the army, the State, and the leader, the father image. They are still religious, however. We will send a clergyman from time to time. Deprived of this, they are withdrawing into the universal substitute for conscious life: dreams. Almost every one of them asked to be sent to Australia or Canada. . . . But maybe you are going to ask me the same thing?'

'No, I'm not dreaming,' said Paul.

'And yet you have made an odd choice,' replied the American, turning towards the window. 'These fields and woods, this isolation, when you have France so close by . . .'

'Let's call it an experiment, a metaphysical experiment,' said Paul, to evade the question.

The American seemed impressed.

'Metaphysical . . . is that so?' He soon began to laugh, 'A rather pleasant experiment, I would say, with such a charming partner . . .'

They sat down to dinner. The Americans asked for a description of the Wittgenstein property.

'We may have a plan for you,' said the one who wore glasses circled in gold. 'Explain it to them, Fred,' he added, turning towards one of the other two officers who was not saying much.

The one called Fred pushed his plate aside. He launched into a confused preamble. It was desirable to prevent, as much as possible, further drift of population, to encourage the refugees to take root where they were. To take root; he repeated the words, tapping lightly on the table with his forefinger. The first requirement for this: jobs, employment.

‘Also the best psychotherapy,’ observed the young man with the glasses, smiling.

‘Work,’ continued the other, ‘is not always easy to find. But here, fortunately, according to what you have just told me . . .’

He reached for his leather brief-case sitting near his chair, opened it, and took out some papers in which he at first appeared to get lost, shuffling them with gradually increasing nervousness . . .

‘Ah, here we are: wood. A thousand cubic metres of wood cut into one metre lengths. And an unlimited quantity of firewood. It doesn’t say for what purpose. A military secret. Needed by the Quartermaster’s Corps. The price, to be arranged, but, don’t worry, you can set it yourselves. Since military secrets are involved, there won’t be any bargaining. I can get you a priority. With the refugees, you have plenty of manpower . . .’

Lena seemed interested immediately; she said that the woods contained enough trees to fill the order. All she lacked was the equipment to do the cutting, and a way of transporting the wood. The horses would be of some help, but they were half-breds, not strong enough for the job.

‘Well, then, come with us to Ratisbon this afternoon,’ the American said to Paul. ‘There you can obtain tools and a jeep with a trailer. You could bring it all back tomorrow.’

Lena reminded Paul that he still had to get his papers

in order. The American with the glasses promised to guide him through the various offices. Paul weakened. The wheels were in motion; it would be pointless to struggle. Everyone rose from the table in an atmosphere of great cordiality.

'While we are here . . .' the third American, who had hardly spoken at all during the meal, said to Paul, 'Among the reports which I filled out this morning, there is something which puzzles me. Just a detail. According to the list from the mayor's office, I am missing one person.' He examined a sheet of paper and pointed to a cross which he had made next to one of the names on it: 'Maria Freiberg. Where is she?'

'She escaped!,' said Paul. 'I heard that they captured her in Hirschenberg. She must be in prison there.'

The young man with the glasses who had been walking ahead, stopped short. He turned around.

'Oh, an escapee!' he said, with an indulgent smile and the tone of voice which a botanist, or an entomologist, might use when recognizing a common species. 'An escapee. And the reaction of society, of course, is coercion, punishment. That's how they produce real psychoses for me!' he exclaimed with a pained expression, as though the psychoses in question had been directed against him personally. 'That woman . . .'

'A girl,' corrected the American who held the lists.

'That girl is going to be sent back here. I'll leave orders in Hirschenberg. She will be put to work. She will take walks in the meadows. And at night, if she feels like it, she will sleep in the woods. She will be liberated, do you understand?'

'She steals and sleeps with anyone who comes along,' said Lena.

'Naturally,' replied the American. 'The romanticism of

defeat, the lawlessness of despair! . . . Put yourself in her place!

'I am a German woman,' said Lena.

'I beg your pardon,' said the young man with the glasses, blushing.

He climbed into the back of the jeep, next to Paul. They started out along the road, through the woods.

'She isn't the one who stole,' said Paul.

'Who?' asked the American. 'Oh, yes, the escapee. . . . It doesn't matter. Everything shows that she is severely disturbed. I am going to send her back to you. You can save her, with all these fields and woods . . .'

The jeep drove down towards the valley. To the left, it stretched, as far as the eye could see, gilded and green in the sunshine, between the wooded hills.

'Stop a minute!' said the American to the officer who was driving. 'It's too beautiful. Look: what else could any human being ask for?' he continued, addressing himself to Paul. He was now standing up in the jeep. 'This peace, this light . . . And how easy it is to find within oneself! A little effort, a few possessions! To work at the job society has put in your hands, to be an upright citizen, and watch out for heresy, and dreams. . . . That may sound a bit dull, of course, and yet . . .'

He sat down and the jeep started up again. 'Do you know why men are sometimes unhappy?' he asked Paul, who admitted, with an irony which escaped the American, that he had no idea why men were sometimes unhappy. 'Well, it's because they deceive themselves!' He paused for a moment. 'Europe, particularly, often deceives itself.'

'That's easily said,' grumbled the man who was driving. 'When we arrived here, a month and a half ago, I saw the corpses of those who had been deported. Were they deceiving themselves? You can die searching for truth,

that's what can happen. . . . The truth must exist somewhere, for God's sake! It's not in Europe, or at home, either. The only difference is that we aren't looking for it. We think we've found it.'

Paul suddenly felt a warm affection for the man. Of the three Americans, strangely enough, he had seemed the least sophisticated. He was the one who had suggested selling the wood.

'The truth!' the young man with the glasses exclaimed, laughing. 'That's easily the most confused, the most imprecise word I know. We live on earth. There are certain norms. Physical, mental, and social norms, that's all I know.'

The other did not reply; he must have been inferior in rank. They soon arrived in Ratisbon. The American officers directed Paul to several offices. They found the demobilization notice applying to him which the French military authorities had sent out. He was given a work permit to replace the temporary papers he had received in Hirschenberg. They also entrusted him with a written order, made out to Lena Wittgenstein, for the wood. Finally, armed with a voucher, Paul found himself in a military parking area where a number of battered jeeps were lined up. The era of 'surplus' had arrived. Paul practised driving the jeep which they allotted him, circling around the vast enclosure. He then went to a military supply store to pick up the lumbering supplies, which he had loaded into the trailer of the jeep.

It was nightfall when he was back on the road again. He decided to go through Hirschenberg. There he would try to see Maria. The American with the gold-rimmed glasses, swallowed up by his duties as soon as he returned to Ratisbon, had probably forgotten to do whatever was necessary to have Maria sent back to the stud farm. Paul

could ask the Hirschenberg police to telephone the officer. He could then give them his orders.

When he arrived in town, Paul went to the mayor's office, to put this affair in the hands of the deputy. He was not there. Paul went to police headquarters. He told them what he wanted. They looked him over suspiciously and then went to check the files in the next office. What they found was very disturbing to Paul: Maria had been sent to Nuremberg.

He climbed back into the jeep and drove to the centre of town where he looked for the first café that was open, in order to telephone. He asked for Ratisbon, and then Department Eighteen of the American military headquarters. He said he wanted to speak to Lieutenant Basker. No one knew where he was. They asked him to stay on the line. Outside, it was dark. With the receiver to his ear, Paul leaned on the counter where the telephone was sitting. A few German civilians who were neither drinking, nor reading the papers, nor even talking, sat looking at him, in the dim light of the room, with a sleepy curiosity. Disappointed by Paul's immobility and silence, they now and then looked out of the window into the street. The telephone, against Paul's ear, remained hushed. A faint crackling could be heard now and then, at a great distance. 'Hello, hello!' Paul kept repeating. No one answered. He stopped, and heard the men in the room breathing and stirring about in their chairs.

'Look! They are stealing something from the trailer!' cried one of them.

Everyone rose. A man opened the door and turned around towards Paul.

'You are being robbed!'

Paul set down the receiver and ran out behind the man. On the pavement to their left, two young boys were

fleeing, holding saws and axes which they had taken out of the trailer. A passer-by was walking in their direction.

'Stop them!' the man who had come out with Paul called to him.

Paul was running towards them. The passer-by spread out his arms, caught the sleeve of one of the two boys, but soon let go. The thieves disappeared into the night. The man, who looked like an old civil servant, looked at his left hand which was bleeding.

'It's from the saw he was holding . . .'

Paul led him back to the café where the proprietress bandaged his hand and gave him a drink which Paul paid for. While he was outside, someone had hung up the receiver. He did not ask for the connection again; it was too late. He said goodbye to the people in the café. They replied coldly. The man with the wounded hand was talking with the others. The proprietress had gone to them and was listening to what they were saying. The incident had brought a little life into the room. No one looked at Paul when he went out.

He set off again, back to the stud farm. Three saws and two axes were missing. Those that were left would be enough. He was thinking of Maria. He would go to Nuremberg. He could no longer bear to have her suffer.

10

The days passed by and Paul did not go to Nuremberg. This was not the result of a decision. It just happened that several things, each as natural as the next, arose one after the other to put off the trip. The jeep was still being used to lay out the lumbering work, when the American purchasing agents announced their arrival. Immediately afterwards, Lena fell sick. It was a rather serious food

poisoning; they ate canned foods almost exclusively. Paul drove the Hirschenberg doctor back and forth for a week.

When the cutting down of the trees had become a well-regulated, daily affair, when the agents for the American commissary had given their approval and paid an advance on the wood, and when Lena had finally regained her health, Paul realized that he was no longer thinking about Maria. It was now more than a month since her arrest. They had probably released her. Black market activities carried only light sentences, usually suspended in the case of a first offender. Where could he look for Maria? She was lost, and it was just as well for the refugee camp, just as well for Paul. He told himself that it was fortunate; he knew very well what he would have expected of the girl, had she come back to the stud farm. He had been lying to himself for too long. Now he had only to watch the trees fall.

In a certain sense, this was a project of elucidation. Each tree that fell brought a little more light into the forest. A little more light, too, into the past, where an exhausted young man lay sleeping beneath the black sky of the trees, where a girl was trapping hares, their nostrils cleft with blood, where lost horses moved about, some almost white, others dark, horses barer than the trees, and finally, where someone was walking, talking, lighting a lantern and turning it off again: ' . . . After the woods, you will cross a plateau. On the other side is a slope and at the bottom you will find a road. Turn right . . . ' A little more light, but all this would still belong to the shadows.

Everything that had happened in the last two months, on the stud farm or nearby, everything that had happened in the mind and heart of those who lived there, or had once lived there, seemed, in some way, to have taken place in a state of half-awakening. Not because of a spell; there

was no magic. Beneath the trees grew brambles, wormwood, and ferns. The sun's rays fell straight between the trees, leafless in winter and now grown into a heavy screen, broken only here and there into a clearing of too dazzling a light. Here, a single leaf, the smallest insect, would take on, for one instant, a blinding reality. A man, a woman, or a horse if one had happened to pass by, would have been exposed in a kind of scandalous clarity. If one thought about it, winter and early spring had probably offered sights that were just as startling. . . . But it was not magic, all the same; it was ambiguity, a play of contrasts, the change of focus often found on forest floor, in short, that disturbing moment when one is only half-awake, between sleep and full consciousness, when images, already linked to reality, teem in one's mind, while sounds, voices, and footsteps still have a phantom ring, borne by the acoustics of dreams.

The felling of the trees was somewhat like the return of reason. When the woodsmen cut down a sizeable tree, the undergrowth was suddenly illuminated. It was as though a cloud over the sun had passed away, as though another season had begun, or, more simply, as though the date had changed, and one was carried somewhere else in time, delivered from the torments of the past. One had the impression of emerging not only from the shadows, but also from the mental confusion which they reflected, perhaps even caused.

Each tree that fell brought if not relief, at least the promise of a solution. This increase in brightness, though still faint, seemed to herald an era of enlightenment whose tangible benefits would soon become evident. The time of disenchantment had come. Lucid thought and action replaced the dreams which Fritz, Lena, and Maria had cherished. For besides the progress of light in the forest,

there was also the discovery of the concrete reality of the trees, their weight, their gnarled wood, the damp sawdust which flowed from the saw, the bark whitened by caterpillar nests.

They fell with a noisy crackling of branches, clawing the ground and laying bare the black earth. For a few seconds afterwards, the leaves torn from neighbouring trees fluttered down through the light in the strange new clearing. Winged insects flew up in a cloud, like chaff from the threshing floor. Then the stillness and silence returned, more intense than a moment before, like a kind of stupor.

No one would have realized, earlier, that the felling of a tree could be an event of such importance. Vertical height is deceptive. The tree, lying down, stretched far into the wood, its trunk more than a chance obstacle, a kind of sudden boundary or barrier ending in an enormous burst of shrubbery. The whiteness of the fractured branches could be seen here and there through the leaves. The forest floor was unrecognizable: a gruesome disorder to which the brighter light, the over-abundance of sky, brought no consolation. The men went to work. Chains were slipped beneath the tree and they, too, bit into the ground. The tree was dragged to a place where it could be cut up more easily. The forest floor began to look like itself, except for a difference in the light.

The felling of the trees took place at the foot of the hill, not far from the dell of ferns where Paul had gone hoping to meet Fritz. Beach and pine trees grew here. Their foliage shivered, at intervals, whenever the saws attacked the fallen trunks. Paul took part in the work, and by proving his zeal in this way, he was able to assert his authority. He had also organized teams of refugees to work in the fields, and had managed to stow the hay into the lofts in time. As more farm jobs arose, he decided to

house some of the refugees in one of the abandoned tenant farms. Fritz' farm was also vacant, but Paul hesitated to appropriate it without his consent.

Meanwhile, the municipal authorities in Hirschenberg had set up a home for aged women and women with small children. Those who had been at the stud farm were moved there. With the transfer of the agricultural teams to the tenant farm, the large hall was now two-thirds empty. This gave Paul and Lena great satisfaction. Engaged in tasks which they knew to be profitable, in which Lena took part by supervising the work in the fields, they settled into a routine of sober responsibility.

They decided to get married. They had promised this to one another for a long time now. August was almost over; the evenings were growing shorter. The electricity was finally working and they dined with the lights on. Ahead lay the darkening gloom of autumn. The security of marriage would be welcome. They drove down to Hirschenberg to register at the Town Hall. The deputy mayor took a friendly interest in them and wanted to expedite the formalities. He led them through the now-deserted corridors.

'It seems that the food packages are to be discontinued.'

'I don't know anything about it, but, in any case, there's the PX,' said Paul. They had been authorized to use the army supply store.

'Oh I see: you get special privileges,' said the deputy without hiding his bitterness.

He said goodbye to them rather abruptly, in front of the window for marriage licences, and walked away with his shoulders bowed; so much happiness was unfair.

Paul and Lena soon found themselves back in the streets of the little town. Nothing spoke of war any longer. The refugees, the escapees, and the hunted-looking young men

who kept close to the walls had disappeared. Only now and then did an American army truck, driven by a negro, speed through town. Lena wanted to go to a black market outlet which the deputy had mentioned, where one could obtain cloth of good quality in exchange for scarce commodities such as coffee and chocolate, with which she was very well supplied.

Paul stayed behind and decided to walk around the town, waiting for Lena who was to return to the jeep once her errands were done. A Renaissance fountain inscribed with a date, with a blackened bronze horseman above and a Triton below, flowed in the middle of a square surrounded by gabled façades. A man was drinking from the fountain. He stood up, ran the back of his hand over his mouth and walked slowly in the direction of the street along which Paul was coming. Paul recognized Fritz. Not without difficulty; the former steward had aged a great deal. He was thinner. A beard of several days' growth, almost entirely white, covered the lower part of his face.

When he saw Paul, Fritz stopped and leaned slightly to one side, as though about to flee. He let Paul come up to him, however, and held his hand out, tentatively, without saying a word.

'I'm surprised to see you here, and on foot,' Paul said to him.

'The horse died,' replied Fritz, looking down at the ground. 'Yes, he died right under me. He kneeled down. I found myself with my feet on the ground, and as you can see, they have been there ever since.'

'The truth is that you didn't feed him enough!' cried Paul, suddenly irritated, without really knowing why. What did he care about the horse? 'I wish I had never given him to you.'

Fritz shrugged his shoulders.

'Maybe you're right. Blame me. Everyone can blame me now. It's easy.'

'Do you know that I have been looking for you for a long time?' Paul asked. 'It's about the tenant farm. If you don't want to run it yourself any longer, we'll put someone else there. What are you doing here?'

'Nothing,' said Fritz. 'A bit of work for Mathias Verneiss. He gives me a room. Of course, you probably don't know him, he is a shoemaker. He is interested in things . . .' He was silent for a moment . . . 'I remember, at the stud farm, when I used to tell you what I saw and what I was thinking. There's no denying it: it was an extraordinary moment, just then, after the war. A unique opportunity for everyone. You know it as well as I do. Since then . . . Oh, I'm not saying they shouldn't have come back! But they could have come back more carefully, they could have realized, above all, that peace doesn't happen twice. Real peace, when nothing is organized yet, when everything is still possible. An opportunity: we were right in the midst of silence, right in the midst of truth. But no, they were in a hurry to start again, just like before . . .'

'You'll never be cured of your dreams,' replied Paul, shaking his head. 'Well, what have you decided, about the farm?'

'Frankly, I haven't the strength to go back. Nor the interest. All that is too far away now. Mathias Verneiss is trying to get me into the Asylum. He knows someone there.'

'And your wife?'

'She can stay where she is. Things won't get any worse. I'm through with family life, petty bourgeois existence. Finished! This way, I can be free, unattached. One looks.

And one sees.' He pointed at the square in which a few people were passing by. 'Do you know, the others came back without looking at anything, without seeing anything!'

'In all this, are you happy?' Paul asked him.

'Happy . . . It's always the same words coming back again. You live and you ask others how their life is, as though living were a kind of burn that one blows on so as not to feel it, or to feel it less. I'm for the burn, myself. In the first place, it's proof. And besides, there is something underneath which one can reach, if one leaves the burn alone. You'll tell me that it might be worse than the burn. I don't know. But it's worth trying to find out. There is a journey which no one has ever had the courage to undertake, the journey of truth. Does this sound stupid to you, does it?'

'No,' said Paul, 'but not very new, either.'

'As an idea, perhaps. But the facts? Just as the war stopped, there was this moment which I am still talking about, a kind of miracle. A clean sweep, not a noise, not a problem. Everyone at the bottom. Until then, everyone was swimming. That's all right, either you let yourself be carried along, or you drown, with the water no higher than your eyes. But suddenly you touch bottom. You realize that you can still breathe, that it's interesting, purer, that you can even dig deeper and that you will probably discover something. In spite of this, everyone came back to flounder on the surface.'

'It must be a natural reaction,' said Paul.

'Natural! What does that mean? There is not ing natural! Even plants make mistakes; insects make mistakes. People say: life, death, happiness, unhappiness, white, black. With walls in between. I say there is no death, there is no life. It's just that no one bothers to knock down the walls.'

'Meanwhile, you're busy cracking your skull against them.'

'I don't know about that. Once in a while I have the feeling that I am going to find something. Ask Mathias Verneiss. I am having one of those spells! I can hardly breathe. I say to myself: Now I am going to go beyond all this, to see, to understand. Mathias gets scared, seeing me like this. A good fellow, but he has trouble following me . . .'

'I can see why,' said Paul.

'Don't say that. There is something about you. I could sense it very clearly, when I was up there. But now, comfort, love, what can you expect? Love . . . At least the illusion of love, because, when you get right down to it, you don't really love the girl, do you?'

'It's none of your business. Besides, you're wrong,' Paul replied dryly.

'I don't think I an.. But forget it. . . . I myself, as you can see, have given up everything. Fifty-eight years old. A job no worse than another, a wife. I've given it all up. For only one reason: because I said to myself: it's like a diving-board. Everybody walks in mincing little steps to the end, slips, and good night, it's all over. In the moment of extraordinary silence after the war, I realized that there was a spring to it, that one could take a flying leap.' He seemed radiant. Then his face suddenly darkened. 'Of course, I am simplifying. And you think I'm an idiot, naturally,' he added, with malice in his eyes. There was a speck of white foam at the corner of his lips. He smelt of sweat. 'Some day I'll pay you back for your horse.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Paul. 'You have the wrong idea about me.'

'No,' said Fritz, ill at ease and bowing his head. 'I'm a

bit upset, that's all. The heat . . . And then, it's funny, I'm rather afraid of you. You're young, interesting to talk to, but, I don't know, there's something about you. . . . Oh well, enough of all this!' he cried, waving his hand. 'I have to leave.' He held his hand out to Paul who shook it very briefly, and then he walked away.

When Paul came back to the jeep, three men were talking to Lena who was already inside. They greeted Paul with a nod and left immediately.

'Who were they?' asked Paul.

'Neighbours. They've come back. They live on the other side of the woods, towards Mosfeld. You must have seen their houses. The one at the bottom of the hill belongs to the older man. He was a friend of my father's.' The jeep had already reached the edge of town. 'Everyone is coming back,' continued Lena. She looked thoughtful for a moment. 'They told me that Hans has come back, too.'

'Hans?'

'The photographs I had in my room. . . . But he lives much further away. Near Sägemühl.'

'Did you think he was dead, or did you think that living or dead, it was all the same to you?'

'I didn't think about it at all,' replied Lena. 'Besides, let's not talk about it any more.'

They remained silent until they arrived back at the stud farm. Paul did not think it was a good idea to tell Lena about his meeting with Fritz. All of a sudden he felt in a disagreeable mood. Wilhelm was walking around in front of the big building, smoking. Now that the number of refugees had diminished and their situation was changed, there was nothing much for their leader to do. That day, Paul felt very annoyed at his idleness. He went up to Wilhelm to point out how abnormal it was. He

ought to join one of the teams of workers. Wilhelm found these instructions humiliating.

‘In the first place, cutting down trees and digging in the ground are not my line of work. I was a salesman for agricultural machinery. And I hope you don’t think that I am going to wear myself out to help you do business with the Americans! Don’t tell me about the salaries they are paying, either!’ he cried, in a mocking tone of voice, as Paul opened his mouth to speak. ‘It’s exploitation, there’s no other word for it.’

‘In that case, the only thing for you to do is to offer your services to the authorities in Hirschenberg,’ replied Paul, turning on his heels.

He was furious, but troubled. In his mind was the amount of money they gave the workers, at the end of each week. Lena had set the figures herself. For years she had kept the accounts for the stud farm. Farmhands and stable boys had never been paid more. The salaries had seemed reasonable to Paul. Wasn’t he paying a certain amount every month to the American administration who continued to provide food for the refugees? Nevertheless, he had to admit that, under such an arrangement, the sale of wood was proving extremely profitable. The sum, in dollars, which the military commissary was to pay them upon delivery of the wood, amounted to a small fortune.

A strange new emotion came over Paul. When he married Lena, it would be under the law of common property. He would be rich. Half the profits from the transaction with the Americans would belong to him, as would half the forests, the fields, and the buildings. His pleasure was dampened with a slight feeling of shame. He might as well be a little bit generous and have his mind at rest. He told Lena that the salaries of the labourers should be raised. She looked at him in astonishment; she

saw no necessity for this. He persisted. The most elementary sense of justice . . .

'Here we go again! We haven't talked about morality for a long time,' cried Lena, losing her temper. 'It's been quite a while since we racked our brains trying to find something noble, something glorious to do!'

'Maybe it's the only thing in the world that's worth trying,' replied Paul.

'If you have a line of action, perhaps, if you know where you're going; but not this kind of dream that changes all the time! One day we want all of Germany to be humiliated to the last degree, we want everyone to suffer just as much as possible so that peace will have a meaning, we want everything to burn, to be razed . . .'

'You didn't understand; I never wanted that!' cried Paul.

' . . . Then the next day,' Lena continued, paying no attention to his protest, 'we want to communicate with the human race by degrading ourselves, so we open our arms to a prostitute. And now, still in the name of justice, or for the sake of our souls, we want to share everything with a band of worthless Prussians, hardly skilled enough to cut down a tree.'

'To share'—this was an exaggeration, but Paul did not quibble about it. He sensed that Lena wanted him to start an argument. From time to time, ever since they put in their request for a marriage licence in Hirschenberg, especially since she had learned that her former fiancé had come back, Lena had been looking at Paul with a more intense, a colder scrutiny. She was keeping an eye on him. That was why he hadn't said anything about seeing Fritz. By working in the forest, Paul was showing that he had reformed, but a single thoughtless word could undo everything. This was what had just happened. But

if he was to be on trial, why not get it over with, now?

'Listen, if you think that I am too unstable to give you what you have a right to expect, we can still reconsider everything . . .'

He was deliberately calm, almost contrite. But a wave of anger was rising within him. Even if he were carried away once in a while by dreams, it was he who was right and not this little middle-class German girl. She had never shown any love for freedom except in despair, when her country seemed to be engulfed for ever by defeat. Passionate when she was angry or needed to forget, rebellious out of spite or calculation, as she had been the day when she wanted to set the stud farm on fire, she reverted to all her mediocrity as soon as order was re-established, the order favourable to the social class from which she sprang.

'I'll leave!' cried Paul. 'I'm going to leave,' he repeated, this time with a sharp pang of suffering.

'No,' said Lena. 'Everything can be arranged.' She did not seem in the least alarmed. 'Just let me make the decisions, about the lumbering and farming. You have no experience. For you, this kind of responsibility is full of too many moral problems. . . . You will also have to find some constructive outlet for your ideas. Your mind is working in a vacuum. Why don't you write? Or you could give French lessons, down in the valley. Everyone is coming back home, in Hirschenberg and Mosfeld, and I know almost all of them. Apparently Mosfeld is full of huts already . . .'

French lessons in a town that had been burned to the ground. . . . But why not, after all? He raised his eyes and looked at Lena without hatred. Europe had its living dead. He knew that in Hanover, in Mecklenbourg, or in other parts of the country, one could find the descendants

of a few little country gentlemen from the Drôme or the Charente, who had emigrated during the Reformation or the Revolution. They had hidden themselves away in grey little towns drenched with rain and snow. They had fallen asleep there, giving lessons in French, Latin, or the piano. They walked, hurried yet discreet, along the high sandstone pavements, each with a book under his arm. Polite, garrulous like all nostalgic souls, if one was too considerate of them they would blush, because of their poor accents or because they talked too much. Foreign troops, sometimes those of the countries they had come from, would now and then stop in town and requisition attics and rooms. Someone would knock very hard next door, at the dark, impressive portal of a successful miller. The French or piano teacher would lift the curtains of his window, watch the recruits pass by on horseback, and then let the curtain fall. He had turned his back on History. The shadows, only the shadows! The graves of these strangers lay in the most remote parts of Europe, wet, moss-grown, and covered with dead twigs. Why not? Such a calling, of course, implied a certain modesty, to ring people's doorbells around five o'clock, holding a brief-case in your hand, apologizing for the cloudburst which had soaked your clothes—piano tuners, tutors in modern languages, pedicurists, astrologers, perhaps . . .

Paul reflected that he should marry Lena under the law of separation of property. In that way he would remain poor. The harmony of their marriage would be strengthened. Lena was no doubt waiting for him to suggest this. He held back. No. No, he would not teach French; no, he would not be the sheepish husband running around to people's houses to give private tutoring!

'We'll think about it later on,' he said to Lena. 'But

I'll take care of the sale of wood to the Americans. I'll see it through myself. I haven't been getting up at five o'clock every morning for nearly two months now, to turn around and teach the conjugation of verbs to your little cousins down in the valley. As for the rise in salaries I wanted, you can have your own way about that!

'So you think I'm selfish and greedy, do you?' cried Lena, irritated by the off-hand attitude of his last words. 'I couldn't care less about the money! It's your idealism, your mixed-up idealism, the way you question everything, that bothers me. The workers can have their rise. I'll give it to them today!'

Paul went out without answering. He was weary, dissatisfied with himself. He was ashamed of his pride. It was the desire not to be a refugee, an emigré, any more, to own a piece of this country, that led him to accept, even to seek out, the unjust profit this marriage would bring him. He went back to where they were cutting down the trees. He passed Wilhelm who was probably going to plead his cause before Lena.

'When are you leaving?' Paul asked him.

'I have no way of transportation,' Wilhelm replied. 'Perhaps I could wait for the truck that brings the food supplies.'

Paul looked at him intently. The man was not young any more. He had a long, wrinkled face. He kept his eyes lowered.

'Very well,' said Paul.

He walked away and jumped into the jeep. 'First, I have to make them all yield.' This sentence, passing through his mind, surprised him as much as if it had been uttered by someone else. He recognized it as an expression of his pride, but what did 'first' mean? What new

turning-point in his destiny was he approaching, alerted, and yet blind?

II

In the days that followed he participated in the lumbering work with more enthusiasm than ever. He was everywhere at once. He went down into the valley to buy tools and supplies, at astronomical prices because the factories were producing almost nothing; he came back to the forest in a great hurry, arriving just in time to call out orders to the men who stood tugging at long ropes, holding up a tree that was about to crash down; helped roll the logs into place, laid out the stake fences which were to hold the firewood, carried sacks of sawdust back to the stud farm, took over at one end of a two-man saw, marked the trees to be cut down the next day . . .

He had decided to gather the lumber only by 'thinning' the forest. Enough trees were left standing around the one that was cut down so that its disappearance could hardly be noticed. This procedure, however, had the drawback of making it impossible to stack all the wood in one place. The transportation would have taken too long. When the trucks from the military commissary came to pick up the lumber, they would have to drive through the forest, from one stack to the next.

One morning, however, Paul noticed that one of the stacks of firewood, which were arranged by cords, the unit of measure in this part of the country, had been levelled. He remembered having made a similar observation a few days earlier, but he had then assumed that his memory had been at fault. It also came to him that a week before he had seen two men walking behind the trees, not far from where the lumbering work was going on.

At the time he had thought that they were from one of the neighbouring farms and was surprised only by the fact that, walking through property which did not belong to them, they did not come up to greet the woodsmen or the owner. He began to form certain suspicions. Coal being very scarce in the town, firewood was now extremely valuable. Nothing was easier than to bring a cart into the woods at night, up to where the trees were being felled, and take away a cord or so. A watch would have to be established.

Paul confided these thoughts to the team of woodsmen. They found his suspicions justified, though without seeming very concerned over the theft. No one reacted but Holtrman, who simply shrugged his shoulders. He was naturally hostile to Paul who, remembering Maria's past, had treated him coldly from the start. Paul decided to build a small cabin and provide it with cots, where shifts of two men would spend the night, so as to keep off the thieves simply by their presence. The cabin was erected swiftly and that very night two men moved into it. From then on, there were men keeping watch every night. A bonus was paid for this. Paul could sleep in peace.

One evening, while walking with Lena, he felt a desire to go chat with the two men alone in their log cabin. It was a hot night. The first days of September had brought a last burst of summer. There was nothing moving in the forest, lighted here and there by the rays of a yellowish moon. Lena recalled the poaching which she had been engaged in the night they met. These clandestine little hunts, which had brought him close to the living realities of the forest, had had to be given up; laws were tightening again. Besides, the refugees could have followed Lena's example. There would have been trouble. The practical

value of poaching was only secondary to Lena. It was first of all a way of taking physical possession of the land, of these woods where a young girl might have been tempted towards misty poetry, romanticism, that familiar local disease. Paul guessed what she was alluding to, but did not dwell upon it. They approached the cabin. There was no light. The men must have been asleep. Paul pushed open the door which had been left only half closed, and looked in: no one was there.

Since the men organized these night watches themselves, Paul did not know exactly who should have been there. He found out the next morning. It was Holtmann and another man named Weisbach. They had spent half the night playing cards at the tenant farm. All too delighted for an excuse to be rid of Holtmann at last, Paul told the men that he was dismissing them. They would leave with Wilhelm, in the supply truck. The two men began to laugh; this was precisely what they wanted.

Paul turned to the others:

‘Do the rest of you want to leave, too?’

Their faces brightened. What a question! In the towns below they could find work that was better paid, amusements; they could send for their families who had been left behind in the East. Life on the stud farm was no better than being in prison.

‘In a month, we will have cut down enough wood. Then the town authorities and the Americans will let me release all of you,’ Paul told them. ‘Until then, I would like to know that I can count on you,’ he added, slowly, trying to give his words a note of solemnity.

The men did not answer. Paul’s way of speaking was strange to them, especially his tone of voice; this cordial warmth, almost like friendship. . . . They turned away; what had come over him?

The work continued. Sometimes the men worked diligently, sometimes they seemed indifferent. Paul sensed that they were torn between the desire to get the job over as quickly as possible, in order to be set free, and the hope of being dismissed, to be done with this tedious delay. One way or the other, their state of mind amounted to impatience, and made them refuse to take part in the night watch. Paul did not insist; the cabin stayed empty. Before three days were up, however, he again discovered a large gap in the supply of wood. There was little more than two weeks left before they would be ready to deliver the wood, if the work continued at a normal pace. Paul decided to spend the nights in the cabin himself. Lena approved. She gave him one of her father's hunting rifles and some cartridges. From then on, every evening after dinner, Paul set out into the forest.

He fell very easily into the nocturnal solitude. With his gun next to him, he sat on the threshold of the cabin and leaned his head against the door jamb, a large post with the bark still on it. He stayed there late into the night, listening to the sounds of the forest; the flutter of a bird's wings as it jumped from one branch to another, an acorn falling, or an animal moving through the bushes. It reminded him of his childhood. He had long dreamed of living alone in the middle of the woods, taming even the most ferocious beasts.

This childish dream remained a refuge for him, even when, as an adult, he realized that under such circumstances he would have died of boredom. He knew that to be spiritual often means striving after values which would soon make one lose all desire to live. But losing one's desire to live was perhaps the key to freedom.

As the night air grew colder, he would stand up and stretch. How he loved the night! Now and then, hearing

a rodent burrow in the bushes, he would turn on the lantern to catch a glimpse of it. He saw nothing. The glare hurt his eyes. The second night, just as he shone the light into the underbrush, he heard two brief whistles. Some men, probably widely separated, were signalling to one another in warning. He felt like firing his rifle to enlighten them completely. He thought better of it; Lena would hear the echo and become worried.

After that, he did not sit on the threshold for very long. Someone could creep up behind the cabin and surprise him. He would lock himself in, reinforcing the door with a board and keep watch by one of the small window openings built into the log walls. He felt threatened. Various sounds reached his ears, branches creaking, leaves rustling, sounds which, on such still nights, could not be due to the wind. He would go from one window to another, shining the beam of his lantern for a few seconds into the woods, but could see nothing. Then he would go back to the other side of the cabin and shine the lantern in the direction where he had just heard . . . What had he heard?

He could not tell: a whisper, the muffled tread of bare feet, the snap of a branch against a tree trunk, bent and then released. 'I shouldn't use the lantern any more.' He laughed at himself, at his eagerness to light the lantern. The cabin might just as well be a lighthouse, beams shining forth into the woods at regular intervals, from one side to the other. Paul felt sleep catching up with him. He lay down, fully dressed, in one of the corners protected from the four windows. Someone could have shot at him from outside.

'Why do they hate me?' He questioned himself in vain. He already had enough of a past in this part of the world to justify any hostility. But he thought it was mostly

envy. The three neighbours whom Lena had met in Hirschenberg knew that she had made a very profitable deal with the American military authorities over the sale of her wood. While talking with her, they had referred to it very sarcastically. Moreover, one of them was a friend of her father's and might have looked upon her love affair, with a Frenchman arriving here out of nowhere, as a disgrace. But to waste their time harassing him every night was something else again. . . . 'And are they only trying to harass me?' He listened closely. Now the forest was silent. He told himself he had been dreaming. He fell asleep, his hand on the butt of his rifle. Just behind the trigger, the wood was indented slightly, like the grip of a pistol, and marked with cross-hatchings over which Paul ran his fingernail until he lost consciousness entirely.

The fifth night, he woke up with a start. A strange glow shone into the cabin from the small windows. He lit the lantern and looked at his watch: three o'clock. He heard a crackling sound and, realizing what the dancing yellow light came from, he ran outside.

Less than fifty yards from the cabin, the undergrowth was on fire. The bushes and weeds had been dried out by the summer and between them were scattered bits of bark and dead twigs from the fallen trees. The flames covered a large area and shot up the tree trunks like will-o'-the-wisps. A bare space protected the cabin, but it was littered with sawdust and wood shavings, and Paul could see black trails of combustion creeping forward in all directions, like armies of ants.

In the darkness of the woods, opposite the fire which seemed to be marking time, a mass of blackthorn bushes burst into flame all at once, with a crackle of dry vines; then, on the right, a flame skimmed over a large expanse

of tall, almost white grass and subsided instantly, leaving a delicately glowing tracery, each stalk adorned with red-hot tufts, sputtering like green wood. Two pine trees burned only to mid-height, their trunks corseted in short flames, their lower branches bending and snapping in two with a cloud of sparks. The smoke blew back against Paul. He was choking. He began to run towards the edge of the woods. The cabin was surrounded by fire and he had to jump over a heap of burning brambles and weeds, as though over a bonfire.

His panic was mixed with a strange kind of excitement. The loss of all the wood, the obliteration of three months' work, the ravages which the fire would leave in the forest made him despondent, and yet, at the same time, he felt a sense of wonder and admiration at the grandeur of the event, at its purity, and, in a word, though he did not yet admit it to himself, at its beauty. Something had suddenly emerged from the endless monotony of the days and the motionlessness of the trees, and he could not help seeing it as a fresh start offered by destiny. When he reached the meadow, he turned around. A column of smoke which would have been lost in the darkness had it not been illuminated by the reflection from the fire, rose, straight into the air, above the middle of the woods. There was not a breath of wind; the flames would spread very little.

Paul continued on his way, reached the house and banged at the door, calling out to Lena. When she appeared at the window, he pointed to the reflection of the fire; it was not unlike the glow above Mosfeld, four months earlier. Lena ran down in great haste, while Paul went to wake up the men who lived in the barn of the stud farm. They soon joined him in front of the house, showing no signs of ill-will. Lena drove down to Hirschenberg, to alert the firemen. Meanwhile, Paul and

the others would try to cut off the fire by razing the bushes around it and beating it back with branches.

They ran towards the woods. Lena drove off as fast as she could, in the jeep whose white headlights soon disappeared into the night. Paul was surprised by the sudden zeal of the men. For several days now, they had dragged themselves around the lumbering area as though they were exhausted. No doubt this incident brought out in them a sense of duty and a fighting spirit which everyday work could hardly arouse. A solemn inspiration came over them. The glow from the fire, as they came closer, painted their hardened faces with highlights and shadows, with the traditional colours of virility, for which these men no doubt felt a certain nostalgia. On the side where the men were approaching, the fire had progressed no more than fifty yards or so since Paul had last seen it. It was advancing, however, on a front three times as wide, and consuming a number of the stacks of wood which lay in its path. Not all the trees were burning. Some, whose bark was smoother and nourished with more sap bore only dark blisters at the base of their trunks. The ground smoked at their feet. The stacks of logs blazed, here and there, like funeral pyres, while young pines were consumed in slow motion, their trunks and branches burning in relief, like embers, first becoming streaked, then shrunken and deformed in a kind of incandescent leprosy, and finally breaking off and falling to the ground, already carpeted with ashes.

Not far from the opposite edge of the fire, about a hundred and fifty yards away, the cabin was now engulfed in flames. On either side of this little wooden shack, the flames, issuing from the cracks, curled around each log like weeds around the trunk of a fallen tree. Beyond, the fire was catching in the brush. Paul and

several of the men ran over. The others remained where they were, trying to keep the fire from spreading further.

They began to cut down bushes and to beat back the fire with branches. Ashes and the remains of charred plants rose into the air in a cloud, settling on the faces of the men and mixing with their sweat. Shots rang out. The cartridges which Paul had left in the cabin along with the gun were exploding. Shortly afterwards, Paul's team of men had to retreat; although they had stopped the progress of the fire along the ground, the flames had broken out halfway up the trunk of a pine tree, not touched until then. Strange bursts of flame, sudden and oblique, darting like a bird or poised like a flower against the dark mass of the tree.

The men moved to another spot along the advancing edge of the fire. There, through a path covered with ashes and with only a scattering of glowing embers, between beech trees blackened by the fire, it was possible to reach one of the stacks of wood which was burning slowly. It would not be hard to put them out, by rolling the logs along the ground, or covering them with earth.

One of the men suggested this. Was it out of a concern for Paul, to spare him more losses? Or an instinctive desire to save the fruit of common effort? Paul and the men ran to the pile of wood, sparks flying into the air beneath their feet. They overturned the stack and threw earth over the logs. They burned their hands. The air was asphyxiating, as much because of the heat rising from the ground, as from the bitter smell of the baking humus.

The dawn rose between the tops of the trees, where the smoke hung motionless as though it were a morning mist. One pine tree still burned, like a taper, but all around the fire was subsiding. Only the pyres were left, the great watch-fires made of stacks of cut logs. Paul counted them

and added up the losses in his mind: several hundred cords of firewood, about fifty logs four to five metres long, a great many standing trees, and all the tools and equipment stored in the cabin. . . . Lena arrived, followed by the fire-engine from Hirschenberg. They had difficulty manœuvring through the woods. The six firemen finally managed to put one of the hoses in action and directed it, rather haphazardly, around the outer edges of the fire. The water tank was soon empty but the danger of the flames spreading any further had been averted. Now they had only to wait until the piles of logs stopped burning.

By noon, everything was extinguished. Wisps of smoke rose from the ashes covering the ground. They went back to the stud farm. Lena offered everyone a drink. Her face was without expression. Her gestures bore no trace of nervousness. She hardly spoke at all. The firemen lingered on.

‘In my opinion, this was not spontaneous combustion,’ said the fire chief, a rather large man with greying hair, wearing a curious green policeman’s hat. ‘It’s not hot enough at this time of year . . .’ As he said this, however, he wiped his brow with a large, checked handkerchief. ‘An accident? Well, I have my doubts, I must say. It would not have spread so far, starting from a single area. I noticed a gap in one place where the two edges of the fire did not join. There was a space of at least four metres in between. Of course, fire can jump, I know that. But there were no burned trees on either side. Therefore, considering that there was no wind . . .’

‘Therefore?’ asked Lena.

‘Well, it leaves room for all kinds of suspicions!’ replied the fire chief who suddenly seemed afraid that he had said too much. He raised his hand. ‘At times like these . . .’ He emptied his glass with one gulp and did not finish.

Paul paid no attention to what he was saying. He was puzzling over the disappearance of the refugee woodsmen. They had finished their wine without a word and had left the room immediately, one after the other. He went to the window and saw two men waiting in front of the barn, with knapsacks on their backs. A third was tying the handles of two suitcases with a leather strap, so as to carry them more easily, by resting the strap like a yoke over his shoulders. Three more men, also carrying their baggage, came out of the hall.

Paul turned to Lena:

'They're leaving!'

She went out of the room with him, leaving the six firemen around the bottle. When they arrived in front of the barn, the eight other men who had worked on the lumbering team were coming out, weighed down with knapsacks, boxes, and suitcases. They were talking very loudly and laughing. Most of them had not bothered to wash. With their black, unshaven faces, still dazed by the heavy work that night, they seemed slightly intoxicated.

'Goodbye, chief,' one of them said to Paul. 'We're leaving.'

'So soon?' replied Paul. 'But that's absurd. I still owe you some money. And besides, we can see if some of the wood can be salvaged. The logs which weren't burned completely will have to be cleaned off . . .'

'That's your job; we're through,' said another man. 'You paid us the day before yesterday; the rest is a present for you. We're off. We've seen enough!'

The whole group seconded him noisily. 'Oh, yes! We've seen enough, all right! The woods of Unterbach. How can we forget? Too bad no one was selling postcards; we could have taken them along as souvenirs!'

The firemen had come out of the house and were

listening, ready to climb back on to the engine. The fire chief walked towards the group of refugees.

‘Listen, boys, now that the tank’s empty, if any of you feel strong enough to hang on, on top or on the sides, I’ll take you as far as the road. You’ll save three kilometres that way. That’s all though; someone might see us. We aren’t allowed to do this. Come on, volunteers, climb aboard!’

The men ran over to the engine and clambered up on the tank. Three of them could not find room and hung on at the back. The engine started up and drove off along the road through the meadow. The men, some of them crowded together on the red, steel-plated tank, others sitting above the driver’s seat or half lying down on the hoses that ran along the sides, were overwrought with excitement. They made no attempt to wave goodbye to Paul or Lena. Paul had turned his back and was walking towards the house. He heard singing, already dimmed by the distance. Lena came up to him.

‘What are they singing?’ he asked her.

‘An old army song,’ she replied. ‘What else do you think they know?’

As they went back towards the house, they had to pass by the door of the barn which had been left open. Inside was a spectacle of the wildest disorder. Straw was scattered everywhere, right up to the threshold. Harness lay here and there on the floor. On the galleries hung the dirty, half-dismantled curtains. The walls were stripped almost bare. Leather, no matter how old, was valuable at the time. They had gone so far as to cut up the draught collars, which lay about on the ground, reduced to their wooden armatures, the horsehair stuffing coming out in all directions.

Paul and Lena said nothing. They were reluctant to go

back into the house. What would they do there? Lena sat down on the small flight of front steps. Paul did the same and put his arm around Lena's shoulders. He could sense that she was crushed, but trying desperately to keep up appearances. No, beneath the weight of Paul's arm, she began to slump a little. He was moved. Where did he stand, now? He looked at the meadow, the woods, in the clear, yellow light of September; all that had happened had passed away, without a trace. Everything was closing over again. Silence. Nothing. Nothing in the sky, nothing on earth, nothing in ourselves. Less than nothing: the absence even of the desire for anything to happen.

'Maybe there had to be a fire,' said Lena, in a dull voice. 'Now maybe the war is really over.'

Paul did not answer. He did not know what to say.

'Is it really over, this time?' asked Lena, with a sudden heart-rending, desperate note in her voice.

'Yes. It's over, entirely over,' Paul replied, in the tones one would use to console a child. He was moved almost to tears. Suddenly he grew tense. A thought went through his mind. 'She thinks I was the one who started the fire.' He recoiled from the idea. 'But no, that's absurd. She can't believe . . .'

'I wish I had caught the ones who did it,' he said, standing up. 'They were there. I heard them, from the cabin.'

Lena stared at him. His indignation was feigned. He could feel that his voice did not ring true, that his gestures seemed false. This made him angry.

'But I heard them, I tell you!'

Who? Fritz? No. He was incapable of such an act. Wilhelm and the two men who had been dismissed? It was not impossible. The envious neighbours? Or why not the

fiancé from Sägemühl? He blurted out all these names at random.

‘But how can you tell, at night, with the bushes, the trees?’

And suddenly the night in the forest came back to him, he rediscovered the solitary joy and the deep silence in which, once in a while, he had been able to make out the approach of an animal or a man. He realized that during all these nights, he had been living in anticipation. Something was about to happen, had to happen, and whatever was creeping stealthily through the bushes was an answer to his secret desire. The forest had to burn. He had never formulated any of this clearly in his mind; another event just as unknown to him could have happened instead, as long as it was as resounding, as sudden, as long as it restored life to its original nakedness. The stud farm was once again what it had been, four months earlier. This time they could really start from the beginning. Where would they go? Paul ran his hand over his forehead.

‘Why torture ourselves?’ said Lena wearily. ‘It’s done.’ She rose and went into the house. Paul followed her. She turned around.

‘What day is it today?’

He told her the date.

‘Do you know that we’re supposed to get married the day after tomorrow? That’s the last of the three days they set for us at the town hall.’

Paul looked at Lena. He could not understand how she could remain so firm, so determined. He looked at her, straight and tall against the dark tapestry that covered the wall. She seemed to be growing. Paul felt his heart overflow with a mixture of joy and terror.

‘Go to bed,’ said Lena. ‘You’re dead tired.’

Paul had often imagined the return of Lena's father. The fact that there had been no news from him for months now was no proof that he was dead. He was unlikely to be in any hurry to reassure the daughter with whom he had parted in such anger. Besides, he probably found it wise to wait until the political recriminations were over before reminding anyone of his existence. An intercepted letter, or an indiscretion on the part of the one who received it, could have guided the hand of those who sought to punish him.

Weeks and months passed, however, and Germany showed no signs of entering the period of retribution which one had a right to expect. Justice, which was striking down the leaders of the old order with conspicuous severity, seemed to retreat before the immensity of the task and accomplished very little at the level of the middle classes. The sound elements of the population, themselves, did not seem inclined to carry out the purification which they had dreamt about so fondly during the black years.

No doubt they considered that, in carrying out this justice, there would be something contemptible about relying on the presence of an invader, even one who, in fact, had come as a liberator. The idea of national integrity lived on, and sustained this prevarication, these endless days. A military defeat was no substitute for a revolution, and any reforms made possible by it would have been tainted from the start. To wake up in freedom did not turn out to mean opening one's eyes upon a luminous world in which the great issues were justice and the dignity of man. Material needs obscured all else. Concern

about where the next meal would come from took the place of humanitarian dreams.

Nothing, therefore, prevented Lena's father from coming back. During the summer months, his absence had seemed appropriate to the season, a time of wandering, of rustic exile. When autumn came, Paul and Lena began to think that old Wittgenstein was really dead. When they were married, Lena, who had been of age for a year now, had not been obliged to show parental permission or proof that she was an orphan. The shadow of Wittgenstein senior hung over nothing now but the land.

When Lena and Paul considered selling a meadow, in order to raise a little money, since all their cash had gone into the salaries of the woodsmen and the purchase of equipment, they were told that the death of her father, the legal owner, had not been established. They were very disappointed. The two tenant farms still brought in very little. Two couples and three single refugees who had been part of the agricultural team during the harvest, had settled there permanently. Thus rehabilitated into society they were no longer dependent upon the town or the American military authorities, who had eventually taken away those who were left of the original group of refugees. Everything was settling back into the traditional order.

This return to ordinary existence made Paul more conscious than ever of the abnormal character of his own situation. Idle once again, he returned to his horseback rides through the forest. The leaves were falling. Blown about by the wind, they soon covered over all the ashes and charred remains in the part of the forest ravaged by the fire. Paul went there often, not to indulge in melancholy, for the event had left him without any regrets, but to enjoy the strangeness of the place.

Now that the ground bore no traces of the fire, now that, washed by the rain, what was left of the pines and the blackened trunks of other trees had lost their charred appearance and seemed, with their peculiar shapes and colours, to be simply a freak phenomenon of the vegetable kingdom, the burned area had become a kind of wintry clearing. Not the kind of winter which comes every year, but a colder, sharper winter, with deeper contrasts, a winter sketched in charcoal, in which the trees, reduced to withered, disintegrating forms, seemed like fossils, frozen into silence, a petrified ramification of the depths.

Meanwhile the rest of the forest was taking on the colours of autumn. Glowing yellow leaves twirled down through the shade. Above, beyond the wavering treetops from which flocks of darker leaves took off against the light of the sky, clouds were running: all the clouds of Prussia and Saxony, all the clouds of Europe, all the clouds of the sea. A peaceful world! Paul would remain for a moment in the clearing, in this region of truth where bushes had burst into flame before him, as they had for Moses. Now and then in this peaceful world, truth could burn. Often, as he left, he would gallop his horse across the ravaged open spaces. The ashes, still there under the dead leaves, would fly into the air and fall back into the shadows of the woods. He rode away, escorted by this cloud. Inscrutably happy.

After a while, the feeling of his own uselessness began to torture him, and he decided to give French lessons in the valley, as Lena had suggested. She was delighted. They needed the extra income. Besides, Paul's teaching would bring them back into contact with their neighbours. Until the mystery that hung about him was dissolved and he acquired some kind of public presence, their social life would be difficult. Once people knew him,

however, and saw that he was pleasant company, they would invite him to their houses, and he could invite them back. One could die of boredom, just staying around the stud farm!

Paul smiled when he heard Lena complain of boredom. So they had come to this! A bourgeois couple, threatened by the slow strangulation of daily routine, trying to keep a little fresh air in their life, by arranging, at fixed intervals, to see pleasant faces, people who talk, who give each other nothing, exchange nothing, but together create a little society, in this world where loneliness longs, if not for genuine companionship, at least for the first aid of words.

He kept these thoughts to himself, however. Ever since the fire, he had avoided any conversations with Lena that might give away his innermost thoughts. He was like those who are mentally ill and conscious of their troubles, whose lips remain discreetly pinched but whose eyes are laughing. Fraught with inhibitions, they keep to themselves the awesome and scandalous truth which they see constantly proclaimed in the conduct and words of others. They live by it, in silence. Truth has always lived by its own light.

In spite of this reserve, Paul still loved Lena. The deliberate, now almost methodical quality of their love, far from depleting it, made it richer. A world of its own. Their extremely sharp senses, the contacts between them, ever-multiplied and yet still fresh, encouraged a life of the imagination, full of little dramas often far removed from the object of love, in which the delayed but relentless approach of pleasure could be transposed into a foot drumming interminably, an absurd phrase repeated in silent crescendo, or, quite the opposite, into a light which gradually, against a conscious effort to keep it alive, grows dimmer and dimmer behind the eyelids.

In this world of dreams, complicated plots, with no beginning, would unfold, only to be arrested just as they began to arouse a delicious anxiety. It might happen that, after a deliberate wait, prolonged until impatience could no longer be contained, you would reach out to open a door and meet a strange woman, emerging from a long corridor, first close upon you, then closer upon you, in a confining corner where you would make love as though inside the thickness of a wall. The labyrinth of love, more fertile in imagery even than sleep. If this took place in the afternoon, it was even possible to open one's eyes. Then the maze would be reflected in the sky, where little white clouds were swarming, bringing faraway lands with them, one after another, in the silence that followed pleasure: Karelia at three o'clock in the afternoon, Emilia, the Salzkammergut, Friesland, and each time this stranger, this woman, familiar and rediscovered, shattered and fitted together again, this love of myriad faces, often with the taste of salt, like incest.

Besides this waking dream in which love might have tended to become a solitary pleasure, Paul was engaged in another pursuit, to which he brought as much insight as passion. He knew, from having listened to many accounts and many confessions, from both Frenchmen and Germans, all of which corroborated an opinion he had formed from books, that eroticism was rather uncommon in this country and that love rarely went beyond the limits set by the natural union of the sexes. Confined within this tradition, this rigid conception of love, Lena, numerous as her affairs may have been, kept a kind of secondary virginity. It was this thought that had quieted all feelings of jealousy in Paul, when Fritz had described Lena's past.

But her virginity was also Germany's and in struggling

against it, Paul had the feeling that he was bringing germs of emancipation and scandal into the country. To possess a German woman as he would have had he been German was not a real victory. But making her his own by revealing pleasures which she had never known before, this, for Paul, was to conquer not only in his own name, but also in the name of a different art of living, another way of thinking, the mind of another nation.

He soon discovered, however, that Lena showed no surprise, that she welcomed what, judging by her occasional awkwardness, was new to her. He was led to believe that women, no matter what country they are from, are in their very essence uncommitted, so that the most recondite varieties of love immediately become natural to them. Not because they are obliging or forbearant; a thousand little signs would betray them in the eyes of anyone inspired by the amazing clairvoyance of desire. Lena entered effortlessly into this ultimately rather limiting universe.

She disconcerted Paul so much that in the end he asked himself whether a woman's love, in contrast to a man's, was not characterized by such complete abandon of self that anything she encountered became hoped-for, anticipated. Such innocence, such spontaneous generosity, thwarted him, when his audacity might have carried him further. But in these realms, extremes meet and one is thrown back on dreams. Nothing is ever a surprise and, at the end of an amorous experience in which he took every liberty, Paul discovered that he was nothing more than a passionate husband, if not simply an eager one.

At the beginning of November, it began to snow a little. Paul had put a notice in the local newspaper announcing that he was available for French lessons. There were no

replies yet. He rode into the forest to see the effect of the snow. It was already melting. He came back towards the edge of the woods, near the gate which led to the stud farm, and saw Lena's father. He recognized him immediately, although he was thinner and wore a hat. Paul had not imagined Wittgenstein's return like this. He had thought that one evening he would knock at the front door or that he would call to them beneath the windows, late at night. Or else that they would come upon him in the stable, talking to the horses. Anyway, Wittgenstein was dead. Why these dreams?

Now he was there. He was walking along with the postman from Mosfeld whom they had seen once or twice during the summer. The postman was carrying Lena's father's suitcase on the back of his bicycle. He held the bicycle by the middle of the handlebars, as he talked to Wittgenstein, and the front wheel left black arabesques in the thin bed of snow. The men were in no hurry. The postman opened the gate and as he continued ahead, forgetting to close it, Wittgenstein retraced his steps and carefully fastened the latch. They crossed the meadow and pursued their conversation with such animation that at one point the postman, in his Austro-Hungarian uniform (how quickly the stripes and buttons and gold braid come back in this country!) had to grab his bicycle, which started to zigzag wildly and almost toppled over.

Paul thought it wiser not to appear immediately. To be on horseback at this hour of the morning was ostentatious, a way of showing off his seigniorial rights. Lena's father and the postman would have been shocked, and with reason. He waited until they went into the house and then, thinking that his absence would make it all the more difficult for Lena to explain the situation, he trotted his horse across the meadow and emerged from the stable

steeling himself for anything. The postman was returning to his bicycle, which he had left against the front steps, when Paul came up to him.

'Two letters for you. I gave them to your wife.' He nodded his head in the direction of the house, with a smile in which Paul sensed a note of irony. 'You have company . . .'

Paul came into the living-room and the first thing he saw was Wittgenstein, sitting back in an armchair. Lena was probably somewhere in the back of the room.

'But here he is himself, I imagine . . .' said the old man, in a bantering tone of voice, throwing his chest out.

Lena came up and introduced them. Wittgenstein held his hand out to Paul, without rising from his chair.

'I am very happy for my daughter . . .' He was obviously smiling as hard as he could. 'Oh those Frenchmen, they must have something . . .' He held up his right hand and stroked his thumb against his forefinger, in a searching gesture, ' . . . a sense of . . .' He could not find the word and let his arm fall. 'So you come with the troops and then, as they say, love . . . You never know where that can lead . . . Well, to make a long story short: here you are!'

'I did not come with the troops,' said Paul. 'I was a prisoner.'

This information seemed to disappoint Wittgenstein slightly, but it made him reveal his true colours; the man was bitter and was making fun of Paul.

'A sorry business,' he continued, staring ahead. 'I had my share. Under the Russians, my friend. I needn't tell you that every one of those days counted for three . . .'

Paul did not reply; he hated the man. Wittgenstein rubbed his knee slowly, looking at the rug. He sighed and stood up. He wasn't going to start complaining about

those miserable times. One had one's dignity to consider.

'I wonder how you managed to fall into their hands,' Lena said to him. 'You must have gone out of your way.'

Anger made Wittgenstein's eyes shine.

'I would have liked to see you there! At Amberg they told us that the American front lines had cut off the town from the south and were flanking it to one side. By going north and retracing our steps, we could slip through. Then we could drive straight to Konstanz and the border, a matter of seven or eight hours. The enemy lines were full of holes. They were moving too fast. The trouble was that our own high command had ordered all the road signs to be taken down, even the ones that gave the names of the towns. On top of that, there wasn't a living soul around, not so much as a cat, except here and there some poor character frightened out of his wits, who would tell you anything. All the village idiots had been left behind. And so, as we moved north, keeping on back roads . . .'

'That was a clever idea, to flee right into their hands!' said Lena, laughing.

'In the first place, it was Ludwig's fault, your uncle's! He kept saying that we weren't far enough north to start cutting back east. When we finally did . . . Oh, I don't hold it against him; he's dead now. You can pay dearly for a poor sense of direction. That's how we ran into the Russian patrol. It turned out that we were near Plauen. Unbelievable. And he claimed that we had been heading south for an hour! There was no sun to go by, I must admit.'

Wittgenstein then told them how the Soviet patrol had confiscated his car which they needed badly. Frisked from head to toe, Lena's father had been found in possession of a large sum of money. That would have been nothing, if

a little later, during a second interrogation held in an empty school building, they hadn't gone through his wallet again. That time they found a little scrap of paper. It was the postal receipt for a registered letter which Wittgenstein had sent to the head of the National Socialist party of Ratisbon, informing them of his intention to resign as head of the local unit, for reasons of health. In spite of the fact that the contents of the letter could not be proved, the address given on the receipt spoke for itself. The post office seal—an eagle with outspread wings—made it even more incriminating. The Russian officer saw it as evidence of Nazi affiliations and sent Wittgenstein to a detention camp.

He still could not forgive himself for being so careless. Not long before, he had destroyed any papers in his possession relating to his former political activities. But this little receipt, slipped absentmindedly into a corner of his wallet where it had crumpled into a small wad and been forgotten, had been enough. It had cost Wittgenstein and his brother three months of hard labour, clearing the ruins of Chemnitz. They were ill-housed, ill-fed. They had to wear white armbands. At the end of this time, Lena's uncle had died of a heart attack. It had been too much of a shock for him, when they met the Soviet patrol. Wittgenstein, now weakened and rundown, had been transferred to a camp where there was no work and then to another where the prisoners were forced to pile up bricks from the bombed-out houses. Finally, they had let him go back to the west again.

'Exhausting,' he said, collapsing into the armchair. He was not lying; everything about him spoke of extreme fatigue. 'The strain on one's heart. Mine also . . .' he said, laying one hand on the left side of his chest and raising his eyes towards Paul who was watching him.

Suddenly a gleam came into Wittgenstein's eyes. He guessed what Paul was thinking. 'The sooner I die, the better.' Paul knew that Wittgenstein could see right through him, but he did not look away. He might as well know. Open warfare. The silence that had fallen between them deceived no one. Wittgenstein glanced furtively at Lena who stood, still and watchful, in the back of the room. He seemed to be questioning her. She remained impassive and her father, lowering his eyes, began to rub his cheek with the back of his hand, the way men do when they are embarrassed. He probably had not expected to be judged so harshly by her.

'You ought to go and rest now,' Lena said to him.

He tried to smile.

'Yes, you're right.'

He rose wearily and started towards the door of the living-room.

'You'll have to tell me how things are around here. . . . The horses?'

'We got four of them back,' said Lena. 'I'll explain all that to you later.'

'Four . . .'

Wittgenstein shook his head. They heard him go up the stairs. Paul and Lena stood there for a moment without a word.

'I didn't think he would come back,' Lena said finally. 'I feel sorry for him.'

'Sorry for him! Sorry for poor old Germany!' Paul replied, laughing.

Outside the window the snow had begun to fall again, and Paul suddenly felt ashamed. All this whiteness, slowly, patiently settling over what was left of the snow that morning. All this silence . . . And then, this raucous hatred, this fire within the snow . . .

'I can't see myself living with him,' Paul continued, surprised by his own coolness. He was coming back to his senses. 'I think we are going to have to leave.'

'Where would we go? To France? You don't even have a house there. I don't know the language.' Paul did not answer. 'Here, at least, we can manage to live,' said Lena.

'With him?' Paul shook his head, already growing angry. 'Oh, no! Not me. It would begin to seem like something even worse than compromise. You, yourself, have never been able to bear him.'

'That's true, but you saw him now; he's a sick man.' She enunciated each word carefully, with the same muffled fervour that had been in her voice when she had wanted to burn the stud farm. 'He's sick, I tell you.'

'I don't think he's in such bad shape as all that. Did you notice? He wants to take over already. And he is perfectly capable of it. Terribly capable.'

'We won't let him!' cried Lena, flaring up. 'There are two of us. The authorities know us. They are behind us. We won't let him!'

'Lena!'

Paul and Lena each gave a start. The voice was peremptory. Wittgenstein was calling his daughter from the top of the stairs.

'What does he want now?'

She went out of the room. Paul noticed the two letters sitting on a table and opened them. They were in answer to his notice in the paper. A Catholic institution asked him to give six hours of private lessons a week. A lawyer in Hirschenberg, probably the only lawyer in Hirschenberg, asked for three hours of tutoring for his son: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A business-like type. Paul threw the letters on the table. He could see it all clearly! The

impoverished teacher, driving down into the valley every day, at the wheel of the old jeep which the Americans had either forgotten or else not bothered to take back. The mornings would be bitter cold, with ice on the road. Then spring and summer would return and in his jeep, now open, Paul would drive through sun and shade, passing beneath the shadows cast by the trees over the road, as though in a boat riding into the waves. . . . Very likely, he would know moments of happiness. Being able to pay his board and lodging at the stud farm, he would be tolerated by Wittgenstein. As he came home in the evening, he would pass by him, surrounded by horses, overwrought, talking in a loud voice and chewing on a blade of grass. . . . No, he could not endure this! Lena came downstairs again.

‘He was looking for his hunting rifle. He noticed right away that it was not hanging where it used to, in the upstairs hall. I explained to him . . .’

But why was he looking for his gun, before anything else? A wave of sudden joy came over Paul; Wittgenstein had made the first move.

‘I had the feeling that he did not believe me, when I told him that the gun had been lost in the fire,’ Lena went on. ‘He thinks that we took it away from him.’

‘Did he say anything about me?’ asked Paul.

‘No. . . . Well, very little. To him, you are just another accident of the times.’

Wittgenstein appeared again around noon. He tried to be pleasant and launched into an incoherent monologue on France, about which he knew very little and which he tried ineptly to praise. France, the easy life. . . . During the war of 1914, he had been billeted in Saint-Quentin (he pronounced it San Coöenteen). France. . . . He stopped short, admitting to himself that he had found nothing

easy about life in Saint-Quentin. He roamed about the room, picking up each object, one by one, as though he had never seen them before, turning them over and weighing them in his hand to make sure that they were still there. At one point, he noticed that the lower shelves of the bookcase were empty. They had contained magazines and different publications dating from the war years. Paul had burned them.

'I can see that you have put everything in order around here,' Wittgenstein said to him.

'Yes,' replied Paul, tensely. 'In order . . .'

'Well, considering the times we are living through, it was wise.'

Wittgenstein stood looking at Paul, smiling. He seemed embarrassed by Paul's silence and coldness. 'Yes,' he murmured, though it was hard to tell just what this grudging approval referred to. 'Yes . . .'

Slightly bowed, he went towards the door. He stopped, as though absorbed in thought. Then he turned around.

'You don't like me, do you?'

Before Paul could answer, he bent both arms back beneath his chin, as though taking aim with a gun, the way children do. His large forefinger pointed at Paul. 'Bang, bang!' He burst out laughing. Paul was dumb-founded.

'What's come over you?'

' . . . But you'd better watch out! I can too: Bang, bang,' Wittgenstein continued, pointing at his own chest and then shaking his finger at Paul.

He moved into the vestibule and on into the room that opened off it, opposite the living-room. Paul could hear him whistling to himself.

Lunch passed very peaceably. Wittgenstein talked about the countryside, its beauties, its resources. He

drank a good deal and kept Paul's glass filled. He seemed to have forgotten the suspicions which had brought on the peculiar bit of mimicry, a few moments earlier in the doorway of the living-room. He rose from the table with a very red face, but straighter and more vigorous than in the morning. He put on his hat and coat, and went out. Paul could not help watching him through the window. He saw him heading for the stable. Wittgenstein was walking slowly, his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back of his head, with the satisfied look of a landowner inspecting his property.

He turned around suddenly, just as he reached the stable door. With astonishing speed, he levelled his imaginary gun and aimed it at Paul in the window. Paul instinctively threw himself to one side, and then, furious as much at himself as at Wittgenstein, he seized the latch and threw the windows open violently.

'Are you out of your mind?'

His voice broke through the snowy silence. Standing in front of the large hall, Wittgenstein was laughing as though he would never stop. He waved goodbye with his hand, and pushed open the stable door.

Alarmed at Paul's voice, Lena came out of the kitchen. Paul told her what had happened. First she smiled, and then stood pensively for a moment, looking out of the window. Paul followed her eyes. Wittgenstein was riding across the meadow. He was on the horse that Paul had left saddled since morning.

'Well, just see that you fire first,' said Lena.

Was this a joke? No, she had spoken in the muffled voice that Paul now knew very well. She went out of the room, leaving him speechless. Fire at Wittgenstein . . . Yes, he could have shot him, a few minutes before, as he rode

across the meadow. Who would notice if Wittgenstein disappeared? The postman sometimes did not come to the stud farm for months at a time. They could have told him that Wittgenstein had gone away again. But Paul had no gun now.

Even if he had, he would have been incapable of using it. 'One does not kill.' This was a matter of sensibility rather than ethics. Had Paul ever lived without confusing the two? To say that killing someone was distasteful to him because it was irrevocable and because it denied the victim any chance to repent or make amends, did not explain everything. There are some crimes which can never be erased even if the guilty one survives. Behind his unwillingness to kill lay nothing more than a vaguely religious sentiment: all life is sacred and to destroy it is an attack upon the natural order.

But was Wittgenstein's life sacred? That loathsome man, so conscious of the punishment he deserved that he had almost anticipated Paul's wishes. His grotesque mimicry, his hostile attitude, were a kind of dare, establishing a murderous pact between himself and his son-in-law. 'His son-in-law.' Paul felt a physical sense of disgust, as though these few words brought with them the warmth of a flabby embrace, mingled with the smell of old men and cold cigars.

A former Nazi, addicted to cowardice, who, after all, was provoking Paul only because he realized that he was incapable of retaliating. Was such a life sacred, a part of the natural order? No, far from it. Nevertheless, one does not kill. An automatic reaction, the cause of which had become obscure, embedded in Paul's mind. . . . To tell the truth, he lacked the courage.

He also would have needed a sudden burst of anger, a clearer conscience. For Paul admitted to himself that he

felt dispossessed by Wittgenstein's return, that he resented it. Of course he could say that it pained him to see the old order, in its most repugnant form, rising again in the very place where he had been struggling for six months to find truth, wisdom. But his feeling of frustration had another origin; since morning, Paul knew that he was no longer master of the house.

Wittgenstein did not return until nightfall. He was radiant.

'I found almost all my old friends,' he said to Lena. 'Karl and Heinrich, back on their farm in the woods, old May in Zweibrunnen, Schmiedhoffer, on the road to Kreisfeld. . . . For I have lots of friends!' he cried, turning to Paul. 'You'll meet them tonight. I invited them over to have some wine with me. Yes, lots of friends!'

'Here we go,' said Paul to himself. He felt stupid not to have foreseen all this.

'Schmeidhoffer has to go to Sägemühl tonight,' said Wittgenstein to Lena. 'I suggested he go see old Kempen and bring him here. I was happy to learn that Hans had come back. Nobody thought he would, did they?'

'Why do you bring that up?' asked Lena angrily.

'For no reason. I was just trying to find out which friends of mine had pulled through, that's all. . . . They got Schachenmayer, the old horsethief. That doesn't upset me much. Not in the least!' He began to laugh and started upstairs to his room still talking to himself. 'No, not in the least!'

'I won't see those people,' said Paul to Lena, when they found themselves alone.

She reasoned with him; he was wrong. His behaviour would be taken as a mark of hostility. They had to consider the future. People would think that Wittgenstein was being persecuted by his son-in-law. If something

happened to him—and with a man of his age anything could happen—suspicion would immediately fall on Paul and Lena. Besides, all Wittgenstein's friends were now full of reservations about him. If they came tonight, it would be because the stud farm had a much-reputed wine cellar and also, of course, because they wanted to see the Frenchman close at hand. If Paul was friendly, or even just natural with them, they would soon be on his side and turn away from Wittgenstein, whose past was notorious. Life would be simplified. What Lena was saying made sense to Paul. He agreed to be present that evening. However, he would remain in the background and do no more than be polite.

The guests arrived after dinner. Wittgenstein had already had a lot to drink. He remained seated in front of his glass and asked Lena to tell him the name of each of the visitors as she greeted them in the vestibule. Raising his voice, he repeated the name of each arrival in a kind of jubilation, and banged on the table with the palm of his hand.

'May! My dear fellow! You do honour to my house! Come here, quickly!'

The man came into the living-room, a bit bewildered by the enthusiastic reception and the bright lights. It was dark outside. A cold wind was blowing. The guests, some of whom had arrived on horseback, some on foot, rubbed their noses and their red cheeks with the backs of their hands. They sat down at the table, on which bottles and glasses had been laid out. Wittgenstein served each newcomer before he even found his tongue.

'Have some wine. Very good for you. Very good among friends. Drink it quickly so you won't get a chill.'

The man drank as he was told.

'I didn't get up when you arrived because I am

exhausted after being a prisoner of those damned Russians, after my stay with Ivan, as they say. Forgive me. We have all been through too much to stand on ceremony with each other.'

The others nodded and raised their glasses.

'Here's to having you back again. To all of us being back.'

Their voices had a dejected ring. All the visitors seemed to Paul to have faces like cowherds. He was sitting in the back of the room and turning the pages of a book, while Lena brought more bottles, and cakes which she had baked, from the kitchen. Another man arrived and, before sitting down, pulled a paper bag out of his pocket which he held out to Wittgenstein.

'There are only a dozen. They are hard to find now.'

Wittgenstein thanked him and put the bag on the table. Everyone who had been invited was now present.

'But, Monsieur Paul, you're not drinking!' cried Wittgenstein. 'Here!'

He held out a full glass to him. Paul rose and went up to the table to take the glass. Wittgenstein had filled it to the brim. How could he keep from spilling it?

'My son-in-law is French; you probably all know that,' said Wittgenstein to his guests.

Earlier, as each new person arrived, Paul had been introduced to them without comment. The cowherds all nodded their heads; they knew. Paul could not avoid spilling the wine over his hand and on to the floor when he picked up the glass. He put it back on the table and took his handkerchief out of his pocket, to wipe his hand. Wittgenstein did not seem to notice.

'You see, they all knew already! That's the country for you. Everybody knows everything the moment it happens. You don't see anyone watching; it's as though

people had antennae. I'm sure they haven't missed a thing you've done since you arrived! . . . I agree with you; they are dreadful. Really insufferable!' he cried, laughing.

'But they haven't been here,' said Paul, who was beginning to feel annoyance rising within him. 'They only just came back. Besides, I have nothing to hide.'

'You're wrong . . . I'm not talking about whether you have anything to hide or not. I'm simply saying that you're wrong if you think none of them were around. Two of the men here tonight remained behind. Guess which ones!'

The farmers lowered their eyes.

'What difference does it make?' said Paul. He drank the wine in one gulp, set his glass on the table with a resounding, though unintentional, clatter, and went back to sit down at the side of the room again.

'He is right,' said the oldest of the men. 'All that . . . We've had some queer times. When everything was going off all around, well, that's how it had to be. We didn't complain. But right afterwards, no one was the same. Something strange had happened to us. The ideas that came into one's head. . . . Now it's all over. We can start again. No use talking about it.'

'But we should talk!' cried Wittgenstein. 'We have to talk! It's when you don't talk that the trouble begins; you saw what happened, not so long ago. When I came back here, I wanted to talk, as you can imagine. To talk about everything. As I came into the Western zone again, after being with the Reds, I met an American. He was an officer in charge of truck convoys. In spite of his rank, he had to stand beside the road to inspect the trucks as they went by. He said that he would get me a ride. Refugees were allowed, as freight. But we still had to find one that was empty. We waited. During that time, he had

to keep count. I helped him. We counted by categories. I understood right away; six wheels or four wheels. With complications now and then; the trucks belonging to the Engineers Corps were weird-looking contraptions. He had to keep count because something a bit suspicious had happened a few days earlier. Once in a while they would come by eight at a time, at full speed. I would dictate to him. The trucks were all full; it could take a long time for me to find a ride. And then there would be long gaps in between. We talked . . .'

'Talking, always talking!' a young man, Heinrich Nöddler probably, said as he looked at his glass. 'We've been talking for twenty years and the American trucks go rolling by under our noses. Where has it got us?'

'For God's sake!' cried Wittgenstein. 'Where do we stand now, that's what counts!' He carefully poured another round of wine, and then turned his head stiffly, as though he had a crick in his neck. 'A drop more, Monsieur Paul?'

Paul thought it wise to accept, and did so graciously. The farmers smiled and looked at him in a friendly way as he came up to the table. Wittgenstein served him with moderation. He was glowering. He put the bottle down.

'War,' he continued, addressing himself to his friends. 'All of you here are going right back to where you were, forging ahead without ever knowing what happened, what really happened, I mean. . . . Shame on us! Shame on us if we hide our heads, and lie down in our own guilt. As far as I'm concerned, we made mistakes. Just mistakes, we weren't wrong. There's a big difference. Yes, mistakes, a whole bundle of mistakes. The American was telling me this, as we stood beside the road. He said: you stood for the West. The West, that means something. You were following a line of truth, but, unfortunately, it got blurred

in places, it wavered. . . . What he was trying to say, in fact, was that we had truth on our side, but that we made trouble for ourselves. The Jews, for instance. Where did that get us? He was right. It was beside the point. But as far as the truth went, we were on the right track. You understand what I mean: the truth of Christianity against the East.'

The farmers said nothing. Wittgenstein turned around towards Paul who was standing behind him, his glass in his hand.

'You, too. You're from the West and you're still a part of it. With us. With us . . .'

He rose, solemnly, and held his hand out to Paul:

'Let me shake your hand, as a sign of our alliance, our eternal alliance . . .'

Paul could hardly refuse. He shook Wittgenstein's hand limply. There was nothing compromising in this; Lena's father was drunk. He held Paul's hand in his own.

'Is the show over now?' asked Lena, who had just come into the room.

Wittgenstein began to laugh and sat down again. The guests, however, rose to stretch their legs, or else to discourage Wittgenstein from making any more speeches. One of the older men came up to Lena and talked to her in a low voice. It was Kempken, the father of her former fiancé. Paul had waited to hear his name, as the guests arrived one by one. Lena listened to the old man, without looking at him. At one point, she shrugged her shoulders and made some reply, apparently searching for what to say. Then she noticed that Paul was looking at her and walked away from Kempken. Wittgenstein was still sitting at the table, alone, apparently engrossed in his thoughts.

The others took this as a sign of weariness and an

excuse to leave. Lena accompanied the visitors to the door. She locked it behind them and came back through the vestibule.

'Someone left a package!'

She entered the living-room, holding a rather long object wrapped in a bag. Wittgenstein rushed up to her and took away the package.

'Heinrich brought it to me. It's nothing . . .'

He went quickly back to the table, grabbed the paper bag that sat on it, and went to the door.

'Goodnight, children. It's been a long day, full of excitement. I am going to bed.'

Paul and Lena heard him go up the stairs with a heavy tread and then lock the door of his room behind him.

'It's a gun,' said Paul. 'The cartridges must be in the paper bag. He had them brought tonight, to be on the safe side. He doesn't trust me.'

'Not at all,' replied Lena. 'He isn't afraid of you. He has enemies. Other enemies. If he should be found shot down in the forest one day, at least twelve people from around here would be under suspicion.'

'Why did I think of murder?' Paul asked himself. Wittgenstein's enemies might take care of it for him. He tried to make himself believe this. Once again, he had found a way of coming to terms with cowardice.

13

And so Paul became a tutor of French in Franconia. He was soon giving enough classes, either in schools, or in private homes, to keep him busy every day of the week. Often he did not get back to the stud farm until nightfall. His outside activities seemed to relax Wittgenstein's suspicions. The old man had taken over the administra-

tion of the property. He supervised the activities of the tenant farmers, made plans for reorganizing the stud farm, and rode every morning. Immediately after his return, he had hired one of the refugee workers as a caretaker and stablehand. The man slept in the house so that Wittgenstein, lacking an ally, at least had a witness.

Lena's father had given up the petty aggravation of his son-in-law which had seemed to amuse him in the beginning. He treated Paul in an offhand manner, rarely speaking to him. He spent each evening with a few neighbouring farmers. Kempken came often, in spite of the distance between his property and the stud farm. The conversations between the two men sounded more and more like conferences and Paul began to think that Lena's ex-fiancé had not lost all hope, and was sending his father as an emissary. He spoke frankly about this to Lena.

She told him that he was not mistaken and admitted that Hans Kempken had paid her a call one afternoon, a few days earlier.

'He's wasting his time.'

There was no conviction in her voice and Paul did not know how to interpret this apathy: did it reflect the coldness which Hans inspired in Lena or was it proof that the approaches of her former fiancé were, if not welcomed, at least permitted? Paul, however, did not allow himself to complain to Lena. Their separation during the day, because of Paul's work as a teacher, had reduced their relationship as a couple to a brief nocturnal understanding. Sometimes a note of weariness was felt. But it tasted like tranquillity. Paul gradually discovered, however, that Lena held it against him that he had not been able to oust her father. She took refuge in resignation. For the rest of

her life she would love a weak husband, one who was always able to justify his weakness and who, in the darkness of their room, became so carried away by his own reasoning that in the end she gave in to him with the necessary abandon. He enjoyed the illusion of victory, while revealing, at the same time, by almost touching bursts of tenderness, that he doubted his own cause and sought no more than complete self-forgetfulness. Would she have preferred a murderer for a husband?

Paul realized that he was not thinking clearly when he made his future with Lena hang upon these two alternatives. Between murder and apathy probably lay twenty or more solutions, even the first of which he was unfortunately incapable of discovering for himself. Had he been tougher, more resolute, he could have forced Wittgenstein to leave, perhaps even to die of slow mental suffocation. Instead, it was like a chess game between them. Lena's father had not made a false move when he ridiculed Paul, realizing that he was torn inwardly by thoughts of murder. Of course Wittgenstein had provided himself with a gun; it was impossible to be sure with anyone so unstable. But his real weapons lay elsewhere. The silence; the slightly contemptuous attitude; the visits from Kempken and his son; the horses who were never available to Paul, because one was sick, another unshod, because there was ice on the roads and they could break a leg if mounted by an inexperienced rider; even the winter itself, with its gloomy evenings, its mornings when Paul sat shivering at the wheel of the jeep, driving to meet his groggy, red-eared pupils; all this, slowly but surely, reinforced Wittgenstein's victory.

Paul then tried to enter more fully into the social life which Lena wanted to enjoy. He went out of his way to be pleasant with everyone he met through his work, teachers

and local burghers. He invited a few of them to come to the stud farm. They refused, offering various excuses. Certain conversations which he overheard surprised him: Wittgenstein was not very highly thought of in town. No one had the least inclination to come to his house. Furthermore, there were certain things to be said about his daughter's marriage, even though the Frenchman seemed a polite and pleasant-enough fellow. . . . Paul and Lena remained in isolation. She became bitter. When Paul revealed why they were ostracized in this way, Lena turned on him: he did not know how to assert himself.

After Christmas, the neighbouring farmers kept open house in the evening. Lena accepted their invitations. Paul accompanied her but he felt like a stranger, in spite of the way everyone smiled at him. He could not understand the jokes in dialect, showed little interest in card games, and could not bear his father-in-law's joviality. Soon he remained behind, in his room, when they went out in the evenings. Even when the Wittgensteins invited others back to their own house, he did not make an appearance. His courses began early in the morning and he had to get some sleep. Actually, he would not be asleep when Lena came back to their room. She would undress without a word. There was no glimmer of pleasure in her eyes. She could not find satisfaction in these rustic gatherings, but anything was better than the evenings when the two of them were alone together, agonizing over spiritual problems, discussing love, hate, justice, until they were ready to lose all faith in life.

Although this situation could, to a certain extent, soothe the demands of his conscience and his pride, Paul sometimes gave in to melancholy. His mind wandered back to these first days of spring when he had taken over the stud farm. He even recalled, and not unpleasantly, the

period when the refugees were there, a troubled interlude, now brightened by the memory of Maria. Why hadn't he made love to her? Because he wanted to punish himself, to be pure? As usual, the noblest possible explanations! The truth was that he was afraid of losing Lena and the material comforts, the security she brought him. Tormented by remorse and regrets, he would find excuses to linger about the main barn of the stud farm: he needed a wedge of wood to put beneath the jeep, or a leather strap to tie down an emergency gas tank.

One day when Paul had gone up to the loft where he had taken refuge when he first arrived on the stud farm, Wittgenstein came into the building.

'What are you up to?'

His tone of voice was that of a proprietor. Paul felt irritated.

'Sort of a pilgrimage. This is where I hid, the last days of the war, thanks to Lena.'

Wittgenstein had never found out the exact circumstances of how and when Paul and his daughter had met. The fact of their meeting was presumably so disturbing to him that he had avoided thinking about it from the start, and was reluctant to ask any questions.

'This was a dangerous place to hide during a battle. You would have been safer in the woods.'

'It was well before that.'

'What do you mean? I was here until just before the fighting broke out.'

'I know. I even heard you crying, after they took your horses away.'

Wittgenstein looked as though he had been slapped. He stood silent and then shrugged his shoulders.

'Me, crying . . . Well, in any case, it must have given you great pleasure to see what was happening to me.'

'No,' said Paul. 'It was your daughter who was giving me pleasure at the time.'

Wittgenstein's face grew redder, as did Paul's, shocked by the vileness of his reply.

'That's a lie!' said Wittgenstein. 'She was with me.'

'After a while she came out to you.'

Wittgenstein headed slowly towards the door.

'What difference does all this make to me? You weren't the first boy to come around here. And you won't be the last . . .'

He stopped on the threshold and turned around.

'Do you want some advice? If I were you, I would leave. Then everyone would be happy. I am saying this in all frankness. I hold nothing against you. You may hate me, but that's your own business. It doesn't matter. What does matter, and what you stubbornly refuse to understand, is that Lena is waiting for you to go.'

'Did she say that to you?'

'No. And she won't say it to you, either. She doesn't even admit it to herself. But that's how she feels. I know my own daughter.'

He went out, leaving Paul furious that he had not had the last word. He saw himself, standing there on the loft which was like a kind of gallery stage, an actor botching his lines, pretending to be cynical, but brought to this very spot by nostalgia, by sentimental memories. Through the window, he could see the woods, denuded by winter. Apfelwald, Applewood, how could he have been so naïve? In the shadows of the gallery, Maria was slowly unbuttoning her dress. A simple-minded soul like him was just what everyone had needed, to help bridge the painful moment between war and a still-unsettled peace. Now it was time to fasten the leather bridles in the corner of the window, to slip to the ground and plunge into the forest.

From that day on, he thought about his approaching departure. Lena's attitude only strengthened him in his resolve. She did not admit her lack of feelings towards Paul, even though she demonstrated it constantly. If questioned, she would deny that she was indifferent, and spoke of a certain calm happiness which comes to married couples once the bliss of passion had subsided. She was deceiving herself. By leaving, Paul would make her see the light. However, he hated the thought that his departure would mean Wittgenstein's triumph. This man was more than an abominated father-in-law on whom he could turn his back with contempt. He was the incarnation of that Germany which men had suffered and died to destroy. It made no difference that Wittgenstein was a mediocre man. National Socialism was built on the bitterness of shopkeepers, the resentment of landowners, the ambitions of generals and subordinate officers. All this vileness was in Wittgenstein. It found its true expression in his thick features, his loud, arrogant voice. An individual personality, yes, but a symbolic one: the face of an era, the stench of the past. Paul's surrender to Wittgenstein was the culmination of a political defeat. To Lena it was simply a surrender, one that was premature and faint-hearted. She shook her head, when Paul told her of his decision.

'There is nothing between us to make you leave. You're afraid of him.'

Paul tried to prove to Lena that she did not love him. After he had gone, she would take up her life where she had left it, nine months before. She shook her head again.

'You're wrong, I swear!'

He thought that she refused to recognize the desires taking shape within herself. She probably did want her life to revert to what it had been, to be back where she

stood when she met Paul, but at the same time, she probably saw this return to the past as a failure. A second marriage, with a farmer this time, and advantageously, since Kempken was rich, would show that she was not suited to share the life of such an intelligent and cultivated person as Paul. But he wasn't anything of the sort, and he demonstrated this to her. He spoke out in praise of country life, of the simple virtues which lay at the heart of it and led to truth more surely than intellectual pride and its erratic notions. He was sincere; he found himself rather contemptible and tried to persuade Lena that he was, so as to free her from the misgivings which were postponing her decision. Without interrupting him, she let Paul plunge to the depths of self-abasement.

'What is it that you want?' she asked him calmly when he stopped talking, having run short of arguments.

He repeated what he had said: he wanted her to see clearly within herself. Understanding, even if it made their separation inevitable, was better than the blindness towards one's own desires which sustains fidelity.

'Understanding! Where does it begin and where does it end?' asked Lena.

By playing, as they say, 'the devil's advocate', Paul was probably trying to make her admit that she hoped he would leave. Desiring this himself, he wanted to do it with a clear conscience. If he were rejected, he could leave without a qualm, and once again become a part of the suffering world.

'I don't want you to go,' repeated Lena, 'and you can't make me think that I do.'

'What stubbornness!' Paul said to himself. It unsettled him.

However, in the days that followed, Lena's attitude, which could have prolonged Paul's indecision had it

shown a little consideration or tenderness towards him, only strengthened him in his initial resolve. Yes, she was deceiving herself. He was going to leave. All he hoped was that Wittgenstein would not get too much satisfaction ahead of time.

'I wonder if I couldn't set up a summer camp for children here,' Paul said one day as they sat at dinner. 'I brought up the idea at both schools where I teach and also with some of the families. They were very enthusiastic. I could easily find thirty boys and girls. The big barn would lend itself very well and tents could be set up in the meadow. A French vacation for a month, or a month's vacation in French. The cultural relations department of the French embassy would give me a subsidy, I'm sure.'

'As simple as that, I'm sure,' replied Lena's father. 'Only this isn't a camping area, or a children's playground either. It's private property, a working farm, and furthermore, it belongs to me. Too bad, of course, but that's the way things are.'

Lena said nothing. She guessed that Paul was bluffing and had no intention of turning into a summer camp director. Later on she criticized him for these fatuous remarks. He refused to admit that he had not been serious.

'Now you're the one who's trying to persuade me to leave. You're stronger than I thought!'

Lena put her head in her hands.

'We can't go on like this!'

She shut herself in her room and Paul found himself alone, in the middle of the living-room, in a state of extreme bewilderment; there is no hell to compare with the false reasoning of others. 'We can't go on like this!' She was right and Paul, as though he were seeking the illusion of a way out, trying to bring a breath of freedom into his life, would climb into the jeep and start driving.

He drove without a destination, along the back roads, in the woods, through which winter had cut long white swaths. He went down into the valley, then up the opposite slope, and turned for a moment to look back as though at a relief map; the massive hillside streaked with snow, which he crept up every evening to his little hole, like a persevering insect. But what he was really seeking, as he drove, was the dizzying sensation of speed, the feeling of virile precision which it brought him.

Paul enjoyed inflicting himself upon this winter landscape, this rural Germany which had found its way back to everyday routine, to piety and churchgoing, and tomorrow might just as easily find its way back to war. Speed and the physical sensations which came with it had an arrogant, blasphemous quality, like a kind of erection, taking revenge, by its very absurdity, upon this peaceful setting with its snowy wheatfields fading into the darkness.

Old as the jeep was, its engine still ran smoothly. Only the tyres showed dangerous wear and tear. Paul had no way of replacing them. The American PX to which, because the military authorities had renewed his card by mistake, Paul still had access, did not carry anything of this kind. Everywhere else there was a shortage.

'That's how you can get killed,' Wittgenstein remarked one day, kicking the tyre of the jeep. 'Look, it's worn through to the fabric.'

'I know. But it's kind of you to point it out to me, just the same.'

'Well, since you pay no attention to any of my advice . . .' Wittgenstein replied, laughing. 'Hans Kempen came over, yesterday morning. Did Lena tell you?'

'No. But I imagine you were the one who asked him to come.'

'You're wrong, as usual. I have nothing against you. As far as I'm concerned, you can stay here the rest of your life, or mine, anyway. I am only saying that if I were in your position, just as a matter of self-respect . . .'

He went away; his words lingering in the air.

'I won't ask Lena for an explanation,' said Paul. Why struggle? The truth would come out by itself. Lena was revealing how she felt, bit by bit, without saying a word. Sometimes the night would bring them together again, and Paul would make love to her in a kind of shameless desperation. Perhaps, by forcing to the limit this rage of ours, so thievishly short-lived, we could reach that realm of nakedness and truth which we die for not having known. The birds go by, crying, the sea splashes against the land, far away, the sky races overhead, the clouds rush in from everywhere, pierced by rays of white light, the trees creak and sway, straining like masts even in mid-winter, an endless motion of which we are not a part. We wear ourselves out, in static errors. Only love, perhaps, with its fury, can make us participate in this flight of the world, as it hurtles towards the horizon, and bring us before this truth in which all truth is forgotten, this light which eclipses time.

In the morning, whenever his work left him free, Paul would set off in his jeep. He went further and further. One evening, darkness surprised him as he came down a wooded slope, a foothill of the Bohemian mountains, in a part of the country which was deserted because of its closeness to the frontier. Violet clouds covered the sky, as far as the pallid streak which marked the horizon. Below the level of the winding road was a river which seemed to be swollen by rain and melting snow. The water had risen, in places, above the roots of the trees along the bank.

March, already, the collapse of winter. Then the

celebrations of spring. Spring, life year by year, day by day, minute by minute, was this water flowing by in the shadows, swirling into eddies, sweeping along the dead branches; it was this water, pale with silt, now and then catching a glimmer of the light that was being smothered, far on the horizon, between the dark clouds and the undulating outlines of the land, whose jagged knolls and thorn bushes were so desolate that not even a dog ever appeared.

Paul let himself coast swiftly downhill, turning right and then left in a series of zigzags, the tyres screeching each time. At the bottom of the hill the road straightened out again, before a last sharp curve thirty or forty feet above the river. Paul bore down on the accelerator. The wind whistled by the corners of the jeep, with a light vibration as though someone were humming. This noise, or rather this music, sounded every time the car reached its maximum speed. It was then that Paul felt a delicate terror, rather like desire. The turn was coming closer. First put the brake on, and then accelerate on the curve, to hold the road better. Having gained momentum again, the jeep was just rounding the bend when the right front tyre blew out. Paul steadied the wheel. Too late. Off balance, the jeep tore into the low embankment, crossed it, and plunged into space.

Paul was thrown out of his seat. Before he hit the ground he had time to see the jeep pass overhead, the jeep with its bolted, sheet metal body, with one precise detail, the little steel support with which the windshield was adjusted, a perforated bar of metal, painted tan, now upside down and strangely prominent, as the vehicle hurtled through the air. Paul knew that the car was going to fall on him. He tried to put his hands to his head and at the same moment he hit the ground. The shock exploded

in his skull. A black veil came over his eyes. He felt himself rolling and tried to cling to the ground. There was a loud splash and then silence. A sharp pain started in his left temple and spread out. He opened his eyes, leapt to his feet—alive!

Almost without seeing where he was going, he set out very quickly on the narrow bank which ran along the foot of the ravine. He held both hands to his temple and stumbled at each step. Alive. He was fleeing the place which, in his semi-conscious mind, held the roots of this pain that was growing like a plant; fleeing the sharp photographic vision of death. After a moment, the pain subsided and Paul looked at his hand. No blood. He was leaning back against a tree. The jeep? He saw the river, a few yards away, and remembered the splashing noise which he had heard, as he fell. He went to the edge of the water, dipped in his handkerchief, and applied it like a compress to his temple.

All of a sudden he felt wildly happy; to have survived this accident gave him a sense of pride, a promise of immortality. Life, restored to him once again, took on a dazzling freshness. He discovered that his left elbow and his hipbone on the same side were sore. He felt them; only bruises. He would climb up the steep bank, back up to the road, and stop the first car that came along. It could take him to the nearest village. There they might know how to drag the jeep out of the river. It must have been completely submerged, for dazed as he was when he got to his feet, he would have seen any part of it that was above the surface of the water. But the image that remained in Paul's mind from that moment of suffering and terror was quite the opposite: a river yellow with clay, water flowing swiftly and silently, water which he imagined closing over his own death.

The car had turned upside down as it plunged off the side of the road. Had he fallen with it into the river, Paul would have had little chance of getting out. The icy water was probably deep and the current raging at this time of year. He would certainly have drowned. Paul smiled at the thought. He was much more kindly disposed towards himself now. 'They didn't get me this time, either!' He continued walking along the river, looking for a place where the bank was less steep and he could pull himself up to the road. It was then that the idea came into his mind.

Vague at first, it was barely distinguishable from the reflections swarming in his head, brought on by his miraculous escape. With the floods that followed the melting of the snow, where would his body have come to rest? It might never have been found. A quiet death. Not so much a death as a disappearance. At first, people would have thought of departure, of flight, and then, when the level of the river subsided again, they would have discovered the jeep. But the time for tears would have been long past. The proof of his death would have simplified everything, a real deliverance. From that moment on, it would have been hard to tell the sighs of mourning from those of relief. Separation, divorce often give rise to postures which can last a lifetime. No one likes to deny what he once asserted. But the death of the other person frees one from such dogged attitudes. Then freedom is complete, without witnesses.

He too, at this moment, enjoyed freedom without witnesses, and felt exhilarated by it, as he walked along the river which now flowed further from the road, between wider banks that flattened out into meadows. Freedom without a single witness, not even those anonymous faces multiplied by one's legal and social existence; the freedom

of a dead man come back to earth, wandering about with no aim other than to watch the spectacle of life, and no desire other than understanding.

What thoughtful man would have scorned such an experience? When you have allowed yourself to be trapped by conflict, when everyday life begins to resemble the mazes, the blocked corridors with doors leading nowhere, in which specialists in animal behaviour put rats, a false death or disappearance is the only exit which does not lead you back where you started. By feigning death, by putting a distance between himself and the rest of the world, Paul thought that he could discover, in Lena and others, certain truths which could not come to the surface in his presence. He wanted also to survey his past, secure in anonymity, with the perspective that comes from stepping back into the wings of life. Absence, absence from everything. A kind of transparency. Not to be there, but to see, to see everything . . .

He knew this ancient longing for death by its true name: the pride of not being. If we were cut off from sight by the walls of nothingness, we would all ask to come back as far as the last sunlit façade. From there, without moving, we would watch life stirring about the clustered towns, blue in the distance. We would see them smoking, speckled with light against the darkening sunset. We would recognize, from far away, the trees, the streams in the outlying countryside, and through them we would discover in ourselves a heart purer than the one we had before. We would tremble with love and weep with understanding. Soon, just as prisoners are rounded up after a walk, we would be called back towards narrow doorways cut into the walls. We would slip back into the darkness, with the eerie sound of our footsteps echoing behind us, or else only silence, the silk walls of the night.

Paul walked until morning, stopping frequently. He was saving his strength. For some time now, he had left the river behind him and was following a road. He reached a rather large town and went into the first open café, for something to eat. He had enough money with him not to have to worry about how to live, for three or four weeks. A few days before, he had received his wages as a tutor and had not left the money in his room on the farm. Feeling that he might leave at any moment, he had not wanted to open his drawer and find that someone else had helped himself.

In the café he almost fell asleep over his breakfast; the walking and all his emotion had exhausted him. Struggling against sleep, he waited until the stores opened. He bought a suitcase, some clothes of poor quality, for everything was extremely scarce at the time, and some toilet articles. He then went to the first hotel which he could find and asked for a room. He filled out a form, showed his papers. Who would come looking for him here? Paul was probably twenty kilometres from where the accident had taken place. Even if they started searching before the jeep was found, they could never check all the hotel registers in Germany in just a few days. Once the floods subsided, which was bound to happen soon, and the jeep was discovered half-submerged in the water, they would naturally assume that Paul was dead and he could safely appear at any hotel in the country.

He slept until the end of the afternoon; being a walking dead man put him in the right mood for sleep. Besides, he felt the lightening of ties, their absence, as a physical sensation. Finding the material of his new pyjamas too

rough, he had gone to sleep naked, in spite of the coldness of the room. When he opened his eyes, it was growing dark. He thought of Lena and felt a sudden pang of longing. To reach out, touch her body . . . Why had she remained such a stranger, locked in a silence which he could never break through, even in the moments when love bared them to the very depths of their being?

He thought to himself that she had been alone since the night before, knew she was alone, abandoned, and that she now faced her second night of solitude. The second night, already. Absence passes quickly. He had slept. She, too, would sleep and then the third evening would be in sight. There was a long voyage ahead of them. What if she were unhappy? Really unhappy. He sat up suddenly in bed, in a kind of panic, and then lay back again. What conceit! Hadn't Lena resigned herself to the coldness that had come between them in the last few days, hadn't she been responsible for it? He let himself sink back on the pillow. Someone knocked at the door, which he had bolted. He asked what it was.

'It's only to find out if everything is all right,' replied a man, probably the hotel-keeper. 'Since we haven't seen you since this morning . . .'

'I'm resting,' Paul called out.

'Very well,' replied the man. 'Will you be coming down to dinner in a little while?'

'Yes, I'll come down.'

Paul could hear a woman talking to the hotel-keeper, without being able to understand what she was saying.

'If you don't feel well, if you need some aspirin or something . . .' the man continued. 'My wife thinks that the bump on your head might be causing you pain . . .'

'How could they tell?' Paul wondered. Then it came to him that he hadn't looked in a mirror since his accident.

The night before he had undressed very quickly and thrown himself into bed.

'No, thank you. I'm coming down.'

The couple went away again. Paul ran to the mirror over the wash-basin. He saw a blue swelling, on the left side of his forehead. A bruise, on which a bit of blood had dried, reached from there to his hairline. Paul's head must have hit a stone or, more likely, considering the mild nature of the wound, a piece of wood or a root. It was rather similar, but on a smaller scale, to the bruise made by the two blows of the stick on the lame man's bald skull. Maybe he wasn't dead, after all. This was one of the first things which Paul was to find out, now that he had decided to reconsider everything, to start from the beginning. The idea of going back to Harzburg, the town from which he had escaped, brought back all Paul's new-found serenity. He went down to dinner, and made a point of smiling cheerfully at the hotel staff, so as to dampen the curiosity which he had aroused earlier. He asked for directions: Harzburg was only about a hundred kilometres to the south-east, not far from the Czechoslovakian border. He could get there by train and then by bus.

'Have you come a long way?'

The hotel-keeper was looking over Paul's shoulder.

'No,' replied Paul, aggravated. He thought that the hotel-keeper would have behaved less indiscreetly had he been dealing with someone else. In the small towns, where the prisoners had mingled with the inhabitants to a certain extent, an attitude of familiarity and condescension towards Frenchmen still persisted. The hotel-keeper spoke of them.

'You are the first one I've seen since the war was over. But maybe you weren't a prisoner. Apparently some of

those who fought with us on the eastern front stayed on in this country.'

'I was a prisoner,' Paul answered curtly, 'but that's unimportant.'

'Of course,' said the hotel-keeper who did not seem to notice Paul's mounting exasperation. 'But sad, just the same. Well, that's the war for you!'

He walked away, stopping next to a table where another man was dining.

'A former prisoner,' he said, nodding in Paul's direction.

'What town were you in?' the man asked Paul, across the room. When Paul, beside himself, did not answer, he repeated the question in the kind of truncated language used with natives in the colonies: 'What town you prisoner?' He turned towards the hotel-keeper who stood nearby. 'I knew a lot of them down in that part of the country.'

'If you will excuse me,' said Paul, rising. 'I would just as soon not talk about it. Goodnight.'

He left the dining-room and went back to his room. He was concerned; in the first few hours of this underground existence, he was already attracting attention. As soon as the staff and the guests of the hotel read in the newspapers that a Frenchman had been the victim of an auto accident, not far from here, and that the body had not been found, they would remember Paul, the bruise on his forehead and his odd behaviour. He would be wise to leave as soon as possible.

Even though the train which would take him near Harzburg did not come through until the end of the following morning, Paul left the hotel as soon as it was daylight. He took refuge in a café near the station. The time began to drag almost immediately. The local news-

paper had nothing in it at all and he soon threw it back on the table. Outside the window, on the other side of a paved area where cars came to turn around now and then, some masons were building a house. Planks, whitened with plaster, had been thrown over the leafless bushes, vestiges of a garden in which one could still see a few paths, bordered by curved tiles. Above a small brick wall that was partly collapsed, an iron fence, once painted green and now peeling, was bent towards the ground in a deep arch, as though under a heavy burden. The blast from a bomb, no doubt. The new building, already three-quarters erected, was square, white and utilitarian. All of Germany was becoming a kind of draught-board. The masons were whistling. Paul could make out their hollowed cheeks and pursed lips. Grey clouds passed overhead.

A man opened the door of the café; it was the guest who had called out to him in the dining-room of the hotel, the night before. He gave Paul a hostile glance and went towards the cashier's booth in which a fat, bald man was sitting. Though he carried a suitcase, the newcomer seemed to be right at home in this establishment. He shook hands with the cashier and started talking to him in a low voice. At one point they both turned around to look at Paul. He felt a pang of terror. All at once it was as though he were carried back exactly a year, to the moment when he had escaped. He felt hunted, threatened. He reassured himself; what was there to risk, now?

The man stepped behind the booth. Paul heard him open his suitcase. The other leaned over, keeping an eye on the rest of the room. He appeared to grab something which he slipped quickly into a drawer. The man left the café in a hurry, suitcase in hand; his train was arriving. Paul laughed to himself at the fright he had felt earlier; it was no more than a little black market deal between the

two men. Tens of thousands of German people made their living that way. 'Why shouldn't I, after all?' Paul said to himself. What would he do when he ran out of money? He still had the card which allowed him to buy provisions from the American PX. There he could obtain goods that were worth their weight in gold. Such compromises with reality disturbed him somewhat but they would guarantee his material independence and, in the long run, his freedom of thought.

He arrived in Harzburg towards the end of the afternoon. He was not surprised to find the little town untouched; in his memories it had remained the same. The day he fled, he had crossed this square, had seen this gabled house, darker than the others, with a large billboard on the chemist shop below, portraying a large red heart with the words: 'Presco—your heart's best friend.' He stood without moving, near the bus which had brought him. Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He started; it was the conductor asking him for his ticket which he had forgotten to turn in. The man smiled at Paul's bewilderment.

Night began to fall. Paul put off his search until morning. He took a room in a hotel called The Grapevine Hotel. To Paul, who had read this sign so many times, these words seemed part of a familiar but unintelligible language which the town spoke to him. A kaleidoscope of memory. Revisited in peacetime and with a change of heart, revealing itself gradually at the end of certain streets along which Paul had never walked; rediscovered from a new angle, the town mingled its new and old landmarks in such a way that it became strange to him, and at the same time very familiar, as in dreams. The hotel was full and no one paid any attention to Paul. In his room he tried to think of ways of finding out what had become of Peter

Seiss, the lame man, since he had left him lying on the floor, with the wound on his head. Paul knew the name of the street where the secretary of the Nazi party had lived at that time, for some of the French prisoners had been taken there to saw wood. He did not know which house but he could inquire in one of the neighbouring stores. He was not afraid of coming face to face with Peter Seiss. The lame man's past was such that he would never dare raise his voice. And even if he did turn on Paul . . . Paul felt a certain inner excitement at the thought. The last word had not been spoken, everything remained to be said, once the tense silence of the war was past. After all, he was not trying to meet the man. He only wanted to know whether he was alive.

When morning came, he set out for the place where the barracks of the prison camp had stood. They were still there. Women came in and out, carrying tubs, or pieces of clothing gathered from the laundry that was drying on lines in the courtyard. A man came out of the door that opened into the barbed wire enclosure, and, as he passed by Paul, raised two fingers to the leather visor of his seaman's cap.

'Who lives in these barracks?' Paul asked, after nodding back to him.

'Evacuees,' said the man. 'You know, the houses that were bombed out along the road to Vohenstrauss. . . . I don't live here myself; I'm from the town hall.'

Paul was heartened by the encounter; even though the way he was dressed and the way he talked revealed that he was only a minor functionary, the man probably knew everything there was to know about the town.

'Since you live in this town and are close to the authorities,' Paul said to him, 'did you by any chance know a fellow called Peter Seiss?' He offered the man a

cigarette. Too soon. He was acting like a detective in the movies.

'Peter Seiss?' replied the man, taking the cigarette. 'Never heard of him. There are almost ten thousand people here in Harzburg.'

He was walking swiftly ahead, as though he wanted to get away from this stranger, and was examining the lighted tip of his cigarette, each time he took it from his lips between puffs.

'I thought you might know because he held a rather important office in this town, a year ago. A political office, shall we say. But that's all ancient history . . .' Paul waved his hand to express the insignificance of such things, and his scorn for them. His gesture was not a natural one. ' . . . a blond fellow, almost bald, who limped . . . Peter Seiss.'

'I never had anything to do with politics,' replied the man, taking puff after puff on his cigarette. 'Peter Seiss,' he repeated. '*Pe-ter*, not *Pe-teur*. *Pe-ter* . . . You have an odd accent. Are you foreign?'

'Italian,' said Paul. 'But I'll have to be on my way now.' Suddenly wanting to escape this man who was now staring at him from beneath red eyebrows, he named a street: 'Marktgasse, is it that way?'

The man had stopped.

'The second left and then you cross the square. You'll see it ahead, off the avenue. . . . But wait a minute . . .' He had to raise his voice for Paul was already walking away. 'Wait a minute, Peter Seiss, that's not an Italian name. Why are you looking for him?'

Paul did not answer right away. He raised his hand, in a gesture expressing indifference or resignation, the same gesture that he had tried to make earlier. Once again, it was not convincing.

‘Just a friend.’

A friend. The town employee had started on his way, without answering, and Paul stood there, amazed at how close this evasive answer was to the truth. A friend. Why not? For a year now, Peter Seiss had been lying motionless on the floor, with the swelling and red streaks on his brow, docile as a patient under anaesthesia, the wound like a small piece of surgery left unfinished for a moment, a physiological experiment in which this man, still young, had agreed to take part. Peter Seiss was waiting. Such willingness could not help but awaken warm feelings, especially since Peter Seiss seemed to be making a silent effort, a deliberate, difficult effort of will, with the courage of a child in pain.

This long sleep and silence had heralded a strange season, an emptiness in the world, an emptiness in which this violet wound, always in the foreground, emanated a subtle fascination, like an unidentified object unearthed from the ground or fished from the sea, a nameless fruit, come from afar. Soon one stops questioning the nature of the discovery, and sees it through a drowsy tranquillity in which everything, finally, becomes a gift.

Paul wandered about town for some time, before finding the street where Peter Seiss had lived.

‘I wanted to ask you . . .’ he said to a woman in a haberdashery shop, after buying some razor-blades which he did not need. ‘I had a friend who used to live along this street, I think. A blond fellow, almost completely bald, who limped.’ He arranged the coins he owed, one by one, on the wooden counter. ‘His name was Peter Seiss. Do you know who I mean?’

‘Peter Seiss, Peter Seiss,’ repeated the old woman, pursing her lips. ‘No, that name doesn’t mean anything to me.’

She accompanied Paul to the door of the shop. On either side of the street was a row of two-storey houses and a few shops.

'A lame man? Now let me see, there's one who lives over the bakery, but he's dark, and not so young any more. About fifty. A drawing teacher. Is that the one?'

Paul shook his head. The old woman looked at him, with pinched lips. She raised her eyebrows, shrugged her shoulders and turned to go back into her shop. Another customer who was waiting at the door to come in had heard what the old woman had just said. She asked who Paul was looking for.

'I seem to have heard that name before, yes I have,' she said. 'But you are a foreigner, I can tell, so maybe you didn't remember it quite right. Wasn't it Peter Feist?'

She was beaming, proud of her discerning observation. Paul shook his head again.

'Describe what he looks like, the Peter Feist you mean,' said the shopkeeper to her customer. 'Maybe he's the one.'

'But I've never seen him,' replied the woman. 'It's just a name I heard somewhere. . . . Besides, when it's someone else's business . . .'

She gestured to dismiss the matter, gave Paul a suddenly suspicious look, and went inside. The shopkeeper followed, and let the door slam behind her. The little bell on it jangled. Discouraged, Paul started back to the hotel. What difference did it make to him, after all, if the lame man was alive or dead? But he was lying to himself. As soon as he saw the street where Peter Seiss once lived, Paul felt closer to the lame man than ever. In his conversation with the woman from the shop, there had been a brief silence between two remarks, and suddenly, in that moment, the sun broke through the clouds, and the whole street had turned into a scene of happiness.

In a moment, a man would come out of one of the houses, put his keys in his pocket, walk along the pavement, limping (though actually his limp was very slight and Paul's description of him was exaggerated, partly out of spite) and other people would walk towards him, some of whom would greet him. This was taking place in nineteen hundred and . . . but no, it was impossible to give the precise year. It was not long ago, a familiar era, still a living reality like a photograph without a date, in which the style of the clothes, the cars, is not conspicuously different from the present, but already has a melancholy note.

One could not tell what year. Recent ones had been swallowed up by History and this scene was outside of History, in a brief and miraculous respite from war, from national socialism, tyranny and hatred. A man was coming out of his house. The sun had broken through the clouds. Couldn't this be the whole truth? What was there to add? The fate that lay in store for Peter Seiss, a little later, at the end of the street, or beyond, wherever he was going? Once again, a course of events, History. Death lay in store for him. But he would meet it in an absurd way, he would become the kind of man who goes out of his house, puts his keys in his pocket, walks along the sunlit street, says hello to people, and who is found, a few hours later, prostrate, his clothes hanging off him, covered with blood, in an obscure spot somewhere on the outskirts of town, a brothel on the highway, or a gypsy caravan. A dark passion drew him there, a desire he did not admit even to himself, finding some excuse in his job, or his duties for this wild excursion.

Paul was sure that for one moment, that morning, Peter Seiss had existed as a man. As he came out of his house, perhaps, as he passed by the shop. He had existed

by virtue of a scene of which he was a part, with the sun shining briefly in the street, eclipsing the date, the war, the dark passions. What dark passion led him forth that morning? Hatred, to be sure, but in one of its most desperate forms: the desire to provoke violence, to ease the pain which grows inside a person at the prospect of defeat, an inert mass of pain that threatens to suffocate him. Under the weight of such suffering, even a quarrel means a breath of air. . . .

And then death, in all its sordidness, the immodesty of punished corpses, the ignoble face of justice. But what if he were not dead? Then the scene which had come into Paul's mind, earlier, when the street where he stood was suddenly illuminated by the sun, lost its meaning, became almost ridiculous: a man comes out of his house, putting his keys carefully in his pocket, in order to be beaten up with a stick. Everything became commonplace again: a grey spring day in 1945. The death of one man, at least, was needed to make this vision convincing.

After lunch, in the hotel, Paul asked to see the telephone book. Paper being scarce, it had not been renewed for three years. With a tremor of emotion, Paul found the name Peter Seiss. The address given was a number in the Marktgasse. Paul had not been mistaken. He went to the desk clerk in the hotel and asked her to call number 921. The woman frowned.

'921?'

'Yes,' said Paul. The woman looked away and rang the number for him. 'If he answers,' Paul said to himself, 'I'll pretend I'm the operator. I'll ask him to wait and then hang up.'

'There's no answer,' said the woman, putting back the receiver. She had not let it ring more than three or four times.

Paul decided to go to the town hall. There he could probably obtain permission to check the death register. When he arrived in front of the small building, in the style of Wilhelm II, he changed his mind; the mayor's offices adjoined those of the police. Bareheaded officers paced back and forth behind the windows. Paul thought that his curiosity might arouse suspicion and he stopped. The man with whom he had talked that morning was standing on the threshold. He looked at Paul without seeming to recognize him, then, growing self-conscious, he kicked the wedge of wood that was holding open one side of the double door. He would be surprised to see Paul turn right about. But what did it matter? Paul walked away.

Where else could he look? The cemetery! Paul was annoyed at himself for not having thought of it sooner. The cemetery was located at one of the gates of the town, just beyond the avenue that had been bombed. A field of tombs between walls of bare stone. A rusty grillwork gate opened into the enclosure, above which could be seen the tops of iron crosses. A man was working inside, and one could hear his metal hoe scraping the rocky earth. He was working on the topsoil, slowly, throwing tufts of dry weeds behind him. Earth full of hands is difficult to hoe. Paul, without knowing, thought of the hands, all the hands lying empty and open in the darkness, bony fingers curving slightly beneath the surface of the earth. What had not passed through these hands? Caresses, money, the contractions of love and fear, the strain of effort. Now they were dead; they had let go, and yet nothing in the world was free of their clutches. The living were still there, reaching, grasping with the same hands, like blind men, ever present.

Peter Seiss' hands betrayed an almost feminine weak-

ness. Slender, intelligent. Similar hands had moulded fascism and other horrors, for man's violence springs from impotence and ambiguity. Killing is always done in hiding, with tight lips, clammy hands, or else in the strident fury of the weak. In search of an identity. But murder is not a way of finding oneself, as Paul had learned.

He walked along each path, reading the names engraved or painted on the tombstones and crosses. He tried to move quickly, the man with the hoe was standing and looking at him. For the last few hours, Paul felt that his presence in town was attracting attention, giving rise to a slight alarm. It showed itself only in subtle ways: the attitude of the man from the town hall, the rapid retreat of the two women into the haberdashers, or the surprise of the clerk at the hotel telephone; but more than the behaviour of these people, certain looks, a certain silence, when Paul walked about the town or through the lobby of the hotel, made him aware of the suspicions which he was arousing. He read name after name, at an exhausting rate: the town dead, all those German men and women, some gone for nearly a century, corpses in black dresses and suits, passing through his mind like a vast river of identical floating logs . . .

'What's the name you're looking for?' asked the man with the hoe, when Paul was obliged to approach him, in order to look over a group of more recent graves.

Paul told him.

'He can't be in one of the crypts, in any case,' said the man, 'or I would know the name. But if he's just in the ground, well . . . Look over there.'

Paul walked over the part of the cemetery which the man had indicated. He had to work his way through a confusion of neglected graves.

'You don't have to walk on top of the graves!' the man cried out to him.

Paul raised his arms; he had lost the path. It was impossible to tell where the graves stopped and started. Flowers withered in broken pots; iron crosses had fallen over and barred the way. Paul stopped, disoriented, and suddenly weary of his search. A clod of earth thrown by the gardener fell and crumbled at his feet. He turned around.

'Can't you see that you're standing on a grave!' cried the man, angrily.

Paul found his way back to one of the paths and ran out of the cemetery. He was distraught. He said to himself that Peter Seis must be dead or else he would not have been chased out of the cemetery in this way. An absurd thought. Who could know that Paul was the murderer? The murder of the secretary of the local Nazi organization, however, had probably caused a certain stir. People would have found out that the guilty party was a French prisoner. Maybe they had announced his name. Now this name was on the hotel register, had been there since the night before. The police, in checking the list of those in transit through the town, could not have missed it. Of course there was nothing they could do; it was not a crime but an act of war. Besides, Paul had a permit which stated that he belonged to an American occupation service and which authorized him to stay in the country. 'But what did I come here for?' Paul asked himself.

The road back to town seemed long to him. The yellow March sunshine was already hot. Paul felt uncomfortable; then, suddenly, as he walked along an avenue lined with ruins, he was overcome with joy. A nameless, Godless joy. But the absence of God offers no rewards. A crown for those without faith. The deserts they have to cross!

Let them wear a crown and be sainted, sainted for nothing, for nothingness, the only real sainthood. . . . His exhilaration fell. There was the hotel, its reassuring white façade, and a garland of vines drawn on the signboard. The sun had gone in again. Paul could hear the brisk steps of passers-by, behind him on the cobblestone pavement. And amidst this bustle of the town, this everyday coming and going, at the close of the day, he felt better than he would have in the silent loneliness which Lena was suffering. But, once again, his spirits rose, he would match her suffering.

When he asked for the key to his room, the owner himself, a grey-haired man with a deeply furrowed face, handed it to him. Paul's eyes met his, which were full of secret sadness.

'Did you know Peter Seiss?' Paul asked him, with a deliberate bluntness which did not prevent his voice from trembling slightly.

The hotel owner remained silent for an instant.

'Oh, Monsieur!' he replied gloomily, lowering his eyes. 'Why bring all that up?' His hand was smoothing the pages of the open register which lay before him, in a compulsive motion. 'We have suffered too much,' he replied, in French this time, with a touching accent. 'You have also suffered too much, I'm sure. Why talk about it any more?'

Some new arrivals got out of a bus and came into the lobby.

'Will you need your room tomorrow?' the owner asked Paul, still looking away. 'I promised it to someone. I forgot to tell you when you arrived.' His tone of voice had changed. He was talking in German again. 'I suppose your visit to town is over, anyhow . . .'

Paul realized that his wanderings had been noticed.

Had he been followed, perhaps? He replied that he was leaving. The new guests were already elbowing him aside, and he went back up to his room. Why hadn't he asked the hotel owner, 'Is he dead?' He admitted to himself that he no longer wanted to know. He lay down on his bed and closed his eyes: a thousand birds, a thousand waves in the sea, a thousand leaves in the wind, a thousand clouds—a vast loneliness, now without limits. . . . He decided to go to Nuremberg the next day. In his present situation, the quietness of a small town, its curiosity and spite, were not what he needed.

15

In Nuremberg, Paul could not find a hotel room. People from all over the world had been attracted by the trials of the big war criminals. After an exhausting day of wandering he managed, with the help of a waiter in a café, and by promising to pay part of his rent in scarce commodities, to find a room in the apartment of a pensioner who lived alone with his wife. It was a modest room looking over a coalyard, for the house was in a neighbourhood far from the centre of town. Paul felt a sudden sense of panic when he found himself surrounded by flowered wallpaper. Engravings of mountain landscapes, inevitable in this country of pseudo-poetry, hung over the mahogany double bed. On the narrow marble mantel, a little bronze stag was rearing, for no particular reason, like a circus horse. Through the window, hung with crocheted curtains and framed in black utilitarian cotton which had helped to hide the light during the war, rose the monotonous sound of coal being screened. Below, in the yard among meagre piles of coal, aged labourers were sifting dirt for minute scraps of coal.

Paul was comforted by the thought that his presence would go unnoticed in such a secluded spot, while in a hotel the police checked the list of travellers every day. Besides, he did not plan to spend much time there. He wanted to find Maria again. There was no reason to think that she had left Nuremberg; it was an auspicious spot for her activities. However, if she had gone elsewhere, perhaps he could trace her. He decided to use more method in his searching this time, and not to let himself fall into the kind of sleepwalking that had brought him to such a dead end in Harzburg.

Paul asked his landlord for advice. He was a gentle little man with a white moustache, who knew everything about the town, having been a post office clerk there for twenty-five years. He and his wife were one of those well-mellowed couples who make one's daydream of a life filled with silence. Years of mediocre happiness and dull labour had carried these two creatures into the glow of a decline which they greeted with smiling acquiescence. They moved at their customary pace. Soon they would be toddling about, dressed, as always, with a modest elegance, thirty years out of date. Paul found them touching.

As soon as Paul let him in on the secret of his search, the old man, Herr Balluf-Koch, showed unexpected enthusiasm. It is true that, in order to win the co-operation of his landlord, Paul had asked Herr Balluf-Koch to help dispose of the goods which he would obtain in American stores. He would see that Herr Balluf-Koch received a generous commission. At first the old man had appeared uneasy and had stammered something about not being strong enough for activities of this sort. Then he had become quiet, had looked at his wife, and chuckled slightly. There was plenty of time to talk about business;

the important thing was to find that girl. Now Herr Balluf-Koch was bustling about the small parlour, its little pedestal tables heavy with fake Saxe figurines. He almost knocked one over. His wife scolded him, laughing. She, too, seemed happy all of a sudden.

'But I know one of the clerks of court!' cried the old man, stopping short. 'Ernst Schaben, you know him: he came here once before the war,' he added, speaking to his wife.

'I don't remember.'

'Of course, my dear, that memory of yours . . .' the old man replied gently. 'With Schaben's help, I can find out where Maria was sent,' he said to Paul. 'She is young. Perhaps they took her into custody, sent her to some institution, after her trial.'

Paul agreed to accompany Herr Balluf-Koch in his investigations. The old woman had begged him to do this; her husband was absent-minded; the city was full of heavy American trucks driven by speed-crazy negroes. And so Paul found himself walking side by side with Herr Balluf-Koch through the endless streets, lightened by the ruins. Here and there they opened up large squares of sky and heavy white clouds.

'Mark my words, there's more rain coming tonight,' said Herr Balluf-Koch.

Steel girders twisted about amidst stone and rubble. The hydra, an ancient symbol. The time of retribution was at hand. What more could one ask? In a great hall in the centre of the city, the survivors of the old order were being judged. The Allied authorities were arresting them, several at a time. The city of Nuremberg was becoming medieval again. The hastily repaired workshops were again turning out toys of all colours.

'Mark my words: rain tonight.'

Herr Balluf-Koch wore a black hat with a rolled brim and a well-cut overcoat. He walked fast, sometimes anxious to arrive at the court before the clerk left, which had happened twice already, sometimes in a panic at the thought that the American supply store might close. He would wait for Paul in front of the door and slip the merchandise into his large leather brief-case. Paul offered to carry it, out of politeness.

'No, my dear fellow; I'll take it; I'll take it. You are here for a rest.'

Paul had told him that he was taking a sightseeing trip through Germany.

Herr Balluf-Koch finally located the clerk who promised to make enquiries.

'I gave him a can of instant coffee,' the old man said to Paul. 'I could tell that he expected something. That's how things are. It's terrible what is happening to people. A man whom I once invited to my own house! And I even told him that the girl was my niece . . .'

A few days later, the coffee produced results: Paul learned from Herr Balluf-Koch, as they left the court, that on August 20th of the year before, Maria Freiberg had been condemned to two weeks in prison and that the sentence had been suspended. It was now April. The lack of any other information discouraged Paul. Herr Balluf-Koch and his wife reassured him; Maria would be found. The old woman grew sentimental.

'Ah, the perseverance of love! It's beautiful to see. Now, now, don't blush! I guessed it right away, even though you didn't confide in us.'

The doorbell rang. She went to open it and one could hear some kind of argument in the ill-lit corridor. Frau Balluf-Koch came back into the room.

'It's the woman from the Eagle Café, the fat one,' she

said to her husband. 'She claims that we are charging too much for the soap.'

'But she forgets, it's de luxe soap, soap that floats! Let her buy it elsewhere!' cried the old man with an authority he had surely never shown before in his life.

Modest as they were, his black market dealings soon involved Herr Balluf-Koch in a network of contacts and opened the possibility of larger profits. Paul discovered the old man handling merchandise which he had not obtained for him. One evening, he found him examining, with the scrutiny of a philatelist, some ration cards and gas coupons.

'Not bad. They're no masterpieces, but they'll pass.'

He spoke now with more determination. At the same time, he seemed gayer. He held out one of the coupons to Paul; the imitation was perfectly satisfactory.

'That's serious business,' said Paul.

'True, and quite tiring as well. But what can a person do?'

The distribution of the forged coupons engrossed so much of his time that he began to neglect Paul's affairs. However, he was still very friendly towards him.

'I'm so glad you reminded me,' he replied, one evening when Paul mentioned that he would like to continue his search. 'I've got in over my head. The printer is working too fast and I haven't a broad enough clientele. In my position and at my age, I can't go from door to door, you understand. I'll have to find some agents. . . . I'm ashamed to have let your business go for so long.'

'I should say so!' exclaimed Frau Balluf-Koch, laughing. 'Of course you've always been a little casual about the finer feelings.'

'There is a Relief Agency for refugees from the east and the unemployed,' continued the old man, after a moment's

thought. 'My niece might have thought of going there for help. We will stop in tomorrow.'

There was a large crowd milling about both outside and inside the relief centre. It was located in a remote part of town. Since public transportation was not very well organized yet, it took a long time to get there. Paul felt exhausted, but Herr Balluf-Koch was lively as ever. He strode into the building, a temporary structure. Paul sat down on a large stone. Two men and two women in their thirties, carrying suitcases bound with rope, with the weary expressions of people who have just missed a train, came out of the building and sat down not far from him. They said nothing.

'Is there any Wurstmitt left?' one of the women asked after a while, pointing to a suitcase that lay on the ground.

It was a word Paul had never heard. It had no meaning. The first syllable indicated that it was something edible, ersatz, no doubt.

'Yes, a bit,' replied one of the men. 'But with no bread. . . . And out here in the sun . . .'

'The sun never did my appetite any harm,' cried the woman. 'Maybe you don't think it's very elegant?'

The man began to scrape his heel against the ground.

'Don't keep after me, Frieda! The suitcase is right there. The Wurstmitt is inside it.' He sighed. 'Good God! All this gets me down. And people like you . . .'

'That's enough! We all know you're in a foul mood,' said the other man. 'You should have taken that street cleaning job.'

'Too lazy,' continued the woman. 'He'll tell you that it's not his line of work. Look, he won't even stir himself to pass me the suitcase!'

'If you don't watch out,' cried the man, 'I'll dump it right over your head, Wurstmitt and all!'

He had risen. Paul, who was trying very hard to appear indifferent, could not help looking at him. He was a vigorous man and rather handsome. His clothes were threadbare. A kind of distress could be read in his face. He caught Paul looking at him and rubbed his hands against his thighs, in embarrassment. He sat down again.

'I told you, didn't I?' said the other woman. 'If you don't go to window fourteen, you can be sure not to find anything worthwhile. The line may be a little longer there . . . But that's proof in itself!'

'Is there any reason we can't go back again?' continued the companion of the man who had just lost his temper and who stood there, pensively, his head hanging. 'If there's only time, before they close . . .'

'They're not letting anyone else in, didn't you notice?' replied the woman with the craving for Würstmitt.

'It depends how determined you are. Just follow me.'

The man picked up his suitcases.

The two women followed him. The other man did not move.

'If you leave your suitcase behind, he may gobble up all your Würstmitt,' said the other woman to the one who had started the trouble.

They left him with the suitcases just the same. He didn't look up. What was Herr Balluf-Koch doing? Feeling uneasy in the presence of the man with the Würstmitt, Paul walked over towards the building. He couldn't get in for there were clumps of people blocking the door. On the threshold an employee in a white coat held his arms outstretched, trying to hold back the crowds. Three policemen emerged suddenly from a corner of the building and herded the people to the edge of the gravel area out in front. Paul thought he could take advantage of the movement of the crowds to speak to the employee who stood at

the door. One of the policemen ran up to him, seized him roughly and thrust him back with the rest. Laughter rang out. Paul now stood in the front row of the group that barred the approach to the building. He could catch Herr Balluf-Koch as he came out.

'So you thought you could just slip through!' a man said to him. 'What gall! It doesn't always pay, though, especially with those filthy bums!'

Paul shrugged his shoulders to avoid having to reply. The three policemen remained in the space between the crowd and the building.

'Bastards!' shouted one man.

Others took the cue. A clamour arose. The policemen, their backs turned, paid no attention. One of them finally spun around and faced the agitators.

'Quiet,' he yelled.

The cries grew twice as loud. The other two policemen, their thumbs in their belts, drew close to the first. They pretended to walk towards the angry crowd. Behind Paul, people stooped down. Stones began to fly. One of the officers raised his arm in front of his face and retreated, soon followed by the two others. A roar of joy rose from the crowd. Not daring, however, to exploit their advantage, the agitators stood where they were. Far enough back now to be out of range of the stones, the policemen stopped and pulled out their revolvers with a flourish. With their feet apart, one hand on their hips, the other at the trigger, they faced the crowd. The stones stopped flying and the cries subsided.

Herr Balluf-Koch came out of the building. His black hat with the rolled brim, his stiff collar and leather briefcase marked him, without a shadow of a doubt, as an official. The crowd took notice and began to boo. He did not flinch. He walked straight up to the policemen, took

off his hat to speak to them, and, noticing Paul in the first row of the crowd, beckoned to him. Paul rushed forward. Shouts and insults rang out behind his back. They thought he was a traitor to the cause. Stones began to rain down again. One of them struck Paul in the nape of the neck but not hard enough to wound him.

‘Go out the back way,’ said one of the policemen.

Paul and Balluf-Koch walked quickly around the building. The shouting died down.

‘I am terribly sorry to involve you in such unpleasantness,’ said Paul to the old man.

‘It’s not your fault; it’s the times we’re living in,’ replied Herr Balluf-Koch. ‘They’re hard and we have to be even harder. I’m not afraid, not a bit. Do you know that for some time now, since I’ve gone into business, shall we say, I’ve felt free, unbelievably free? As though all kinds of doors had opened for me. But let’s talk about Maria.’

Last August, probably after leaving the court, she had gone to the Relief Agency, to try to get help. After this first visit, she had never gone back. However, she had left an address, as the agency had required. Herr Balluf-Koch took a piece of paper out of his pocket. The address was a boarding-house and a name, Ilse Gohner.

‘There is a good chance that you might find Maria there,’ said Herr Balluf-Koch. He showed Paul the way. ‘I can’t come with you; I have to see the printer. Why don’t you bring her back for dinner?’

Paul found himself in a rather old and shabby part of town. Here and there, ruins spilled out over the sunken pavement. A little further on, when the street continued, narrow and again lined with dark buildings, it was like penetrating another world, cool and full of smells, like going from a clearing into the woods. Paul was sorry that he had not looked for a room in this part of town. He

deliberately went beyond the house indicated by the address. What would he say to Maria? *He had thrown her off the stud farm in the middle of the night. He had insulted her by not accepting when she offered herself. She had probably forgotten him, all too happy to erase this episode, so overflowing with humiliations.* 'But what do you want from me?' she would probably ask him. He retraced his steps. He had to hear her say that; he had to wipe out the past, start all over again with truths as simple as the coldness of some rather silly girl who lives, God knows how, on a city street, looks at you without understanding, opens the door and shows you the way out. . . .

There was no doorkeeper at the boarding-house. Paul saw the name Ilse Gohner on a mailbox with the number of the floor where she lived. He went up a clammy staircase with a rusted iron railing. On one of the landings, a thin stream of water trickled from a leaky tap into a stained cement basin. Paul knocked at a door on which a calling-card with the name Ilse Gohner was held with a tack. No one answered. He knocked again. A fat woman came out on to the landing behind him.

'She's not there.'

'When will she be home?'

'She doesn't keep any regular hours. Sometimes she is away three days at a time.'

Paul asked the woman if there was a girl living with Ilse Gohner.

'Not now. There are some who come and go; little tramps. Are you from the police?'

Paul shook his head.

'Well then, she's not there, that's all,' said the fat woman, suddenly hostile, slamming the door behind her.

Paul ran after her and banged at her door.

‘What do you want now?’ cried the woman from the other side. ‘If you don’t go away, I’ll call down into the courtyard.’

‘Isn’t there a place I can find her?’ Paul asked, his face close to the door. ‘Lean over, I’m slipping something under the door.’

It was a banknote which he had just taken out of his wallet. No sooner had he slipped it in the crack between the door and the ground than he heard a hand groping about on the floor, with a scratching sound like an animal’s paw. The banknote disappeared in a flash.

‘Thanks,’ said the woman, ‘even though their money isn’t worth much these days. . . . But what can I tell you? In the evening, she sometimes goes to the Parrot Club, that’s all I know. I don’t promise anything . . .’

The woman’s voice faded away; she was moving to the back of the apartment. Paul went downstairs again. The street was almost deserted. He had to walk back to a main thoroughfare to find a café. There he drank a glass of bad beer. He asked the waiter if he knew the Parrot Club.

‘The Parrot Club? *Nice ladies*, eh?’ said the waiter, winking at Paul, no doubt taking him for an American.

He told him how to get there. The establishment was nearby but it did not open until seven o’clock, for dancing and cocktails. Paul did not have time to go back to his room at the Balluf-Koch’s to rest, so, while waiting, he wandered around a bit. The blue of the night was growing deeper above the houses, along the avenue where flashing light from old trolley cars lit up the façades and ruins. No, Maria would not reject him. Behind the venality of her behaviour on the stud farm, and Paul’s cruelty, an understanding had arisen which, even more than desire, tasted of the night. He comforted himself with this thought and raised his head towards the sky where, between the roof-

tops and above the nimbus of city lights, he found the darkness, the darkness that had fallen upon them one night, at the end of the road where they had separated, closer to one another than ever.

The trams continued to roll by, carrying men and women crushed together, standing under weak yellow lights, their lips perfectly still. Hunger, exhaustion, in the midst of the flashes that revealed the sharp outlines of the ruins—was this a punishment, a just sentence? The words had no meaning. Had a whole country ever been put on trial? And what kind of justice was it, under which only the people suffered?

Increased hardship for the working classes was no kind of justice, and certainly not a lesson for Germany, but only a way of accentuating, beneath a cloak of righteousness, the inequality which profits the eternal victors in war: those who possess. There was no longer any Germany, no longer any France. For Paul and the people standing in the trams there were no countries at all, only the oppressive duties of a stubbornly held patriotism. This mystique of stockholders was imposed upon them. They themselves held nothing. One could object that these men and women spoke another language than Paul, enjoyed a different kind of food, made love either mechanically or brutally, reasoned in a startling way, had been marching in step since the time of Frederick the Great, but Paul would always manage to discover a profound likeness between them and himself.

The moment any man on earth identified himself and his deepest needs, he became a part of Paul; Paul borrowed the man's eyes, touched with his hands, stepped into his shoes, his clothes, adopted his struggles, his violence. Ever since he was born, and now he realized it again, Paul was married to the hunger of his fellow men.

He lived their hardship; his needs and theirs overlapped to the ends of the earth. They were on the same side, the dark anonymous party which was always making up new flags for itself, hiding them, bringing them out again, hoisting them in a stream of abuse; for it is a shameful thing not to belong to any country! . . . Paul's inspiration faded; such fuzzy thinking! It was getting late and tonight humanity began with Maria.

16

The Parrot Club consisted of a large bar with a shiny wooden counter and an adjoining room with a banquette running around the wall, behind a row of tables. The open area in the middle was used as a dance floor. The music came from a phonograph with a loudspeaker which could be seen in a corner of the ceiling, covered with a beige metallic cloth. The light, coming from wall brackets with painted metal shades, was very dim, and in the shadows that gathered above everyone's head one could make out only the moonlike loudspeaker, out of which flowed languorous, Americanized music. There were only about fifteen men and women in the room when Paul opened the door. No one was dancing. At the bar, two American soldiers were sipping some kind of pink cocktail with a cherry in it.

'There's no atmosphere here before ten o'clock,' said the bartender.

After ordering a drink, Paul asked him if Ilse Göhner was around. No, she was not there tonight. She hadn't come for the last two days. The bartender leaned over the counter, to get a better view of the dance floor where two obviously bored couples had begun to circle about.

'Gertrude might be able to help you—she's her girl

friend,' the bartender said to Paul. He pointed at a red-headed girl who was dancing.

Paul waited until the music stopped and went up to the girl who was being led back to a table by a man in his fifties, with a cruel face. The girl looked Paul over at length before answering his question about Ilse Göhner.

'I've never seen you here.'

He told her why he had asked: he was looking for a girl named Maria.

'Maria?'

The girl did not remember. Her escort was already sitting down and had begun to show signs of impatience. He rose, and as the music began again, he pulled the girl back to the dance floor. She turned back towards Paul.

'Come back at eleven. Ilse might be here then.'

Paul went to have dinner with Herr Balluf-Koch.

'Down at the printing shop, they have big plans,' the old man said to Paul, sitting down at the table, beneath the copper hanging lamp. 'It makes my head swim, but it's exciting, just the same . . .' He began his soup. 'Six-point roman,' he continued, as though talking to himself, 'but the original was five-point. No one noticed, except them. Just in time. Everything can hang on so little. . . . Six-point roman!' He shook his head, smiling, and went back to his meal without saying anything more.

Paul went back to the Parrot Club at the hour the red-headed girl had suggested. The room was almost full of couples dancing and Paul had a hard time finding her. She came over to him at the end of a dance. Ilse Göhner was still not there. Now available, Gertrude accepted Paul's invitation to sit down at a table with him.

'I'll know more about Ilse tomorrow. I'll stop at Mother Lou's. Ilse tells her everything.' Gertrude smiled at Paul. 'So it's true love, is it, with Maria?'

'More complicated than that,' said Paul.

'And no one can cheer you up?' asked Gertrude, with a professional sweetness.

'Temporarily, yes,' replied Paul.

He thought that it might be in his best interests to win this girl to his side. Without her help, he might never be able to catch up with Ilse Gohner who, in turn, was perhaps the only person to know where Maria was. They lingered on at the club, drinking the same sweet pink liquid with a cherry in it, and then went to Gertrude's room in a nearby house. Since there was no light on the stairs, Gertrude held Paul's hand, an endearing touch that probably had an excellent effect on her clientele. Once in the room, Paul saw that the bed was unmade, since the afternoon probably and he remembered the man with the cruel face who had been dancing with Gertrude. She undressed, folding her clothes and underthings carefully. Once naked, she went to wash in an alcove which served as a kitchen, humming melodies from the dance floor. Paul suddenly found himself without desire.

During the course of that night, he enjoyed a brief moment of pleasure which left his mind lucid, and which, by its very simplicity, seemed wholesome in the end. It returned the next morning, leaving him in a good mood which won him Gertrude's friendship. The fee she asked did not seem excessive. They arranged to meet again that evening at the Parrot Club. Paul had paid his tribute and Gertrude did not renew her advances. She told him that Ilse was off on a trip and would not be back for two days. Paul whiled away the time by exploring the district around the club.

Besides several ordinary cafés, there were also three or four establishments of a very specific nature, including Mother Lou's where Gertrude took Paul one evening. It

was a bar lit even more dimly than the Parrot Club. One could hardly make out the couples sitting at the table. The silence which prevailed was now and then broken by a muffled exclamation or a laugh. It was there that Paul met Ilse, a dark-haired woman of about thirty, with a somewhat boyish charm and an intelligent face.

‘Maria has been in Berlin for three months. I know who you are. She told me about you once’

Paul had to restrain himself from asking Ilse what Maria had said about him. He did not want to seem ridiculous, pining after a girl whom he knew almost nothing about. But why had she gone to Berlin?

‘She was bored. There’s more going on there.’

Ilse did not know Maria’s address. She had not written since she left. However, Ilse had a friend in Berlin. She had suggested that Maria go to see her. She could write the friend. Paul urged Ilse to send a letter. She promised, casually.

In order to keep after her, Paul came back the next night. He stopped at Mother Lou’s; Ilse was not there. She was at the Parrot Club, drinking in the company of a dishevelled young man with laughing eyes, whom she treated as a friend. She asked Paul to join them. The young man was a musician. He made himself clear: a musician interested only in classical music. He had grown up in this neighbourhood and was on familiar terms with all the girls. He seemed to take a fancy to Paul. He talked to him as though they were old friends. Gertrude and another girl came to sit down next to Ilse. They were talking about nylon stockings. Paul and the young man were still on Bach.

‘Unfortunately I have too many activities to devote myself to music the way I would like to. To play the violin, one has to live like a monk,’ said the young man.

He looked towards the door of the bar. A large man had just come in. The musician turned to the other girl who sat next to Gertrude. 'Marie-Thérèse!' he said to her, as though calling her attention, with a little nod of his head in the direction of the bar. The girl got up right away and went over to the large man who kissed her hand. They left together.

'Her mind is always wandering,' said the young man, shaking his head. 'If I hadn't been here, she would never even have noticed that he was there. He is much too proud to have come over to our table; he would have gone away in a rage.'

'What about the letter?' Paul asked Ilse.

'You and your letter!' she cried, laughing. 'What are you after with that Maria of yours? Aren't you satisfied here with us?'

Yes, he had to admit it to himself; he was satisfied. In this closed world where nothing reminded one of life outside, where all emotions were forbidden, except friendship, where there were no ideas in the air and pleasure became simple again, he experienced a kind of tranquillity.

From then on he sought out this tranquillity every evening, either at the Parrot Club, or at Mother Lou's, or at one of the other spots, going from one to the other without being conscious of the space between them, as though they were linked by corridors into a vast subterranean warren. Paul's usual company was the musician and a few girls with nothing to do between customers. The war was never mentioned. Just once, Gertrude said to Martin, the musician:

'You know, I heard that Ludwig got ten years at the trial of the Abwehr.'

'That's what you get for taking a uniform too seriously,' replied Martin.

'He fought for his country, just the same!' cried Gertrude in a shattered voice.

Martin shrugged his shoulders and Ilse, who was also there, changed the subject, obviously embarrassed. She had sent the letter to Berlin but there was no answer yet. When Paul complained of this to the Balluf-Kochs, the old man and his wife admitted that they were happy about the delay.

'We will miss you, when you go.'

It was not the fear of losing the profit from the sale of American supplies which made them say this. The traffic in forged gas coupons was thriving and made Herr Balluf-Koch look down his nose at such small-time trade. Considering it a fit activity to fill up a housewife's spare time, he turned it over to his wife. However, the difficulty of finding outlets for the distribution of the gas coupons still limited Herr Balluf-Koch's profits.

'Why don't you mention it to your girl friends?' he said one day, after Paul had described the world into which his search for Maria had led him. 'The arrangements are very advantageous. And of course you won't be forgotten, either.'

Paul agreed. It was a whim, a kind of childish yearning. Though he had been taken in by the circle around the Parrot Club, in the eyes of the men and women there, he still remained an outsider, not being either a client, or a sucker. An illegal pursuit would make him one of them. He spoke about the coupons to Ilse and Martin. They showed great interest. Gertrude was approached on the subject and assured them that she could dispose of a rather large number. Two other girls, the bartender, and Mother Lou, a large woman with dyed hair, who claimed she had once been an actress in Vienna, were brought in on the secret.

Paul began to supply the coupons. Soon a table was reserved for him at the Parrot Club, in the very back of the room where the shadows were darkest. Girls would come up to his table, with eager faces. Someone had told them . . .

‘What?’

Paul looked at them, pretending to be surprised. It was no game. He was aware of the risks involved. If one girl talked to the police, he was through. Nevertheless he gave in and, reaching his arm under the table, he gave the girls the coupons. Sometimes he even let them have some on credit. They were all very fond of him. He found the same affectionate welcome at the Balluf-Koch’s, who were delighted by this expansion of their business.

‘To tell the truth, it’s not really the money that interests me,’ confided the old man, ‘though, at the rate we are going, it won’t be long before I will be able to buy that house in the country which my wife and I have always dreamt about. But that’s secondary. The truth is, I enjoy this little business. It’s a kind of revelation, do you know what I mean?’

Paul watched the old man pace back and forth across the room, his head bowed, deeply preoccupied and pausing between each sentence. This man was also looking for something, stubbornly, almost desperately.

‘A revelation?’

‘Yes,’ continued Herr Balluf-Koch. ‘As a post office clerk, I earned a very modest living, as you can imagine. From far off, I could see the world of business, of wealth. A closed world, a world apart. I could have stood on my head, I never would have been able to get in. I accepted this. I would say to myself, “Not for the likes of me!” I was impressed, naturally. And now suddenly everything collapses in front of me. There isn’t anything to it.

Industry, banks, coupons, it's all the same thing. You see, in our society, everything belongs to the forgers. That's the only way to have power over things; to falsify them. One way or another. Think of almost anything, the bread you buy at the baker's; maybe it isn't false, in itself—and even there!—but it's used in a false way. The price is raised by one person or another, always somewhat illegitimately. My dear Paul, to be seventy-one years old, and to discover that the only way to be free in this world is to cheat, that's quite a shock; it's like seeing the ocean for the first time . . .'

After having thus examined the larger philosophical issues, there were accounts to be settled. Paul was receiving such a sizeable rebate from Herr Balluf-Koch, that he found himself without material worries for several months. Ilse, however, had not received any answer from Berlin.

'You ought to write again,' said Paul to the young woman.

She made fun of him and found others to echo her. Paul's burning desire to find Maria was now known to everyone at the Parrot Club. Some of the girls were touched by this display of fidelity. Others tried to destroy it, by giving themselves to Paul without asking for money. They probably also felt that it wasn't a bad idea to be on good terms with the purveyor of gas coupons. Sometimes Paul was tempted, but the next morning he showed that his determination was unshaken. He would go to Berlin. First, another letter should be sent. If there were no answer in two weeks, he would take his chance. Ilse wrote, tossed the letter in the mailbox in Paul's presence, and shrugged her shoulders.

'Maria is just an idea you don't want to give up.'

He did not answer. She had guessed right. He did not

love Maria. He only wanted to rediscover a moment in his past which had offered him a kind of truth, a truth which, through stupidity, ignorance, he had rejected. What truth? He could not say. It had been one of those moments in life when one is pushed to the breaking point. He had felt the oppression of someone who will scream a second later. What the scream will be is impossible to say. As the tension rises, one can only sense the relief which it will bring, at the price of a terrible disgrace.

Psychologically, people lived below sea-level. History, the ordinary problems of heart and mind, the practical arrangements of living, were a Netherlands, with its vaporous summers, its frost-etched winters, and the backlit waters of its canals. Above it all was the imminence of the sea, behind the dikes. The whole, indeterminate sea. The joyous sea. Ready to break over you. And the seeming mediocrity of each meeting, in a stall on the stud farm, a corner of the woods, the moon between two ribbons of cloud on the horizon, the words that were spoken, an unfamiliar profile, what did this matter when the sea was there, hidden, a silhouette, but already lapping at the hand that might take your own? The sea that will wash away everything. It had to be.

Yes, he was forcing himself. He was forcing his way to the sea, trying to break the dikes. To do this, he had to pass through different stages of being, a series of animal mutations, effortless metamorphoses. At this moment, he was a little honkey-tonk buddha selling coupons that were already as shiny as playing cards. But he told himself that he was living through an experience not unlike what the Hindus call 'Karma', in which man, after his death, goes through successive reincarnations, from a vegetable to an animal state of being, then to the human condition, and finally to a state of pure mind, and the light of

revelation. For the one who was being conveyed from one body to another, from one species to another, there was nothing to do but watch for the moment when a new existence was about to begin, the moment when a new panel would unfold in this enormous polyptych. The moment it snapped into place.

One morning as Paul was on his way home to the Balluf-Kochs, having spent a rather wild and hard-drinking night, he saw a dark car parked in front of the door. He never knew what it was that alerted him. He walked past the car, and looked inside. A man with a bleak liverish complexion sat at the wheel. Paul sensed the presence of the police and continued on his way. About a hundred yards farther, he cut off into a side-street and watched from around the corner. Nothing was happening. The car was still there. His suspicions allayed, Paul was about to start back towards the house when Herr Balluf-Koch came out, accompanied by two men. All three got into the car which started up immediately.

Paul decided not to go back there; a policeman might be standing guard, or a trap set somewhere nearby. He retraced his steps, making a wide detour, back to the Parrot Club district. At that hour, the establishment was closed. All Paul's friends were asleep. Who would take him in? He decided to ask Ilse Göhner's advice. At her door, he had to wait for a rather long time before she answered. She was not alone. In the bed, a girl seemed to be asleep, her face to the wall, with only her hair and bare shoulders showing.

"That's all right, you can come in," said Ilse to Paul. He told her that something serious had happened, intimating that he couldn't talk about it on the landing.

In the room, Paul's eyes again fell on the girl who was either sleeping or pretending to be asleep. He turned

towards Ilse and his face must have shown a certain surprise, for she anticipated him:

'Well, what of it? Didn't you catch on?' she asked him with a faint smile. 'It was the same thing with that Maria of yours.'

He could have figured it out for himself. But the realization hurt him. For a moment he forgot why he had come, but Ilse urged him to tell her what had happened.

'You'd better get away from here,' she said, after he had told her briefly of Herr Balluf-Koch's arrest. 'The old man might talk.'

Paul replied that it was difficult for him to leave town immediately. He did not say why, hoping to give Ilse the impression that there were other reasons besides waiting for an answer from Berlin.

'Well, in any case, you had better not show your face in that part of town for a long time,' Ilse went on. 'You'll have to find a room somewhere else. Go see Martin . . . Hurry. Don't hang around here . . .' She had opened the door. Paul went out.

'I'll see you.'

'Of course.'

The door slammed. Paul felt very much alone all of a sudden. The bitterness which he had felt at the thought of Maria in Ilse's bed came back to him. He tried to be reasonable; such blows were good for you. He had to know all the faces of Maria before arriving at the truth, the truth of which he had caught a glimmer, one evening in a corner of the woods. In the street he felt uneasy. What if someone were following him? He turned around several times without seeing anything suspicious in the appearance of the people walking behind him. On a whim, as he rounded the corner of a street, he cut across the ruins. The portions of wall still standing kept him out of sight.

Here and there, caves opened into the ground, sunken labyrinths where corpses might still be trapped.

Paul said to himself that he was returning to his own element, or rather, that this was an image of the world which still imprisoned his mind. He was not yet back from the war. He refused peace, and sought, as a reward for his suffering and that of others, peace in a higher form, peace in which people would not simply return, a little more cautiously this time, to the ideas and feelings which had dragged the world into so much horror and death. Everything that he had done during this time seemed absurd to him, even somewhat degrading. Of course one has to take what comes, on the road that leads to truth, but still, this state of being a walking dead man was not what he had expected. It was all too real, too dangerously real! This business about the police . . .

He reached the street again, stamped his feet on the ground to shake off the white dust from the rubble, and found his way up to Martin's room. He shared it with the girl who was his protégé. Martin was sitting in bed. He listened to Paul's story, his lips set. In his grey eyes there was always a kind of glow, due to their colour, no doubt, which looked like gaiety.

'Marie-Thérèse can easily find out how much the police know. Did you see the fat one this evening?' he asked the girl. She shook her head. 'He's a police chief.' Martin continued, talking to Paul. 'He takes coupons from Marie-Thérèse, for himself and his cronies. This couldn't have been his work. Besides, he's wild about her. . . . It's just the printer who's gone and gotten himself caught, that's all. The main thing now is to find you a place to hide . . .'

He asked Paul to give him until noon to think about it. He made a date with him at a café in the centre of town where he arrived three-quarters of an hour late.

‘Couldn’t find anything.’

A hotel would be too risky, because of the registers that were checked by the police.

‘. . . you’ll have to get out of town.’

Paul was determined not to.

‘You don’t have to go very far,’ said Martin. ‘Twenty kilometres from here and you won’t have to worry. We’ll come see you. The warm weather is almost here . . .’ Martin got up. He had a lot to do. ‘Call me at the Parrot Club any time.’

He left, and Paul again felt a sense of loneliness. Were these people friends of his? No, not friends, but he was curious about them, grateful for the illusion of warmth that rose from the complicity which bound him to them. This was enough for him to feel hurt by the abrupt way in which they now dropped him. He lingered in the café for a long time and then called over the waiter. Pretending to be a tourist, he asked if there were a pleasant place to stay not far from town.

‘Why there’s Bauerhof . . . Zittstein . . . Mittenberg. I would recommend Mittenberg. It’s where I come from. There are streams, woods . . .’

‘Which way is that?’ asked Paul.

The waiter, a man already well on in years, whose sparse hair was brought forward and glued to his forehead, in the old-fashioned style, waved his arm vaguely.

‘Over there, to the north . . .’

There was a bus to Mittenberg. Paul got aboard at the end of the afternoon, having replaced the essential part of the baggage which he had left at the Balluf-Kochs. He thought of the old man, without feeling sorry for him. He, too, was on the road to truth. At the end of a mediocre existence, he would face prison, bitter faces.

War hadn't taught him so much. One step forward, probably the first and last, for the old man was close to death. What a revenge, to die outside the law! Not that crime was any sure method, any kind of ethic; most of the people from the world of the Parrot Club would never benefit from it. It was only effective for Herr Balluf-Koch because his activities had been an experiment, an attempt to escape the regulations of society and slip behind the mask of life.

During the trip, Paul noticed with pleasure that spring had already begun. Luxuriant leaves and summer light. It was a surprise; the city was dry and barren and Paul had been in the habit of sleeping all day. Now, having been awake for a day and a night, he dropped off into a light sleep. The bus stopped and Paul opened his eyes. He started; the name of the village was familiar to him. He looked at his watch. They had been travelling for more than an hour and according to the name of the village, they were not more than twenty kilometres from the stud farm. The waiter in the café had been mistaken; Mittenberg lay to the north-east and not to the north. Paul got up to speak to the driver; how soon would they reach Mittenberg? In ten minutes. It was the next stop. Mittenberg must be a very insignificant little village for Paul not to remember the name, having lived in the region.

'Three or four houses, at a crossroad,' said the driver. 'There is a small inn.'

Paul thought to himself that if he spent any time in a village so near the stud farm he would run the risk of being recognized. He paid an extra fare and did not get off until the end of the line, an hour later. It was a small industrial town, surrounded by wooded hills. Paul would spend the night there, and when morning came, would start back in the direction of Nuremberg. He wanted to be

closer, in order to wait for the answer Ilse Göhner might receive from Berlin. However, when the morning sun streamed into the hotel room, where he had forgotten to draw the blinds, he felt weary of all this wandering. He would stay another day, and walk in the hills.

There he found the same peace he had once known in the woods around the stud farm. It had been the same season, exactly a year before, when he had first discovered the depth of their shadows and their silence. Then, he had loved Lena. Coming out of the desert of war, he had found in her a presence, the forests of childhood, the happiness of trees alive in the night. She had brought relief to his loneliness, colour and warmth to the landscape. She had been the first word spoken in a world whose voice had been drowned out by war.

Was this love? This urgency, this weakness crying out for help? Since then, everything had returned to its proper order, into that peace which anyone deceived by the forests of Germany will find in them. Lena would soon marry again. How simple and pleasant life can seem, without oneself! Paul imagined the house on the other side of the hills, so close to him, with the sun shining, smoke rising from the chimney, horses moving about in the meadow, an occasional sound, the pulse of life, that perfect life which his own death had sanctioned. A strange happiness came over him. The truth he had been seeking for so long, the only truth, consisted perhaps in not being there, in not being anywhere, in letting life run its course. There is something in the world which is ready to unfold, as soon as we blot out our own existence.

That night, Paul called the Parrot Club in Nuremberg. Neither Martin nor Ilse was there. He asked for Gertrude. She came to the phone.

"The information we picked up was not good. Stay

where you are. The letter? . . . What letter? . . . Oh, don't ask me. I'm sorry, but I can't talk very long.'

She hung up. Paul went back to his room. Below, along the road, heavy trucks were passing, their covered trailers spattered with mud. Their red tail-lights disappeared into the darkness, while their headlights still shone on distant houses. These, in turn, faded into the night. Paul had no desire to go back to Nuremberg. The town had closed its doors to him, retreating into peace and silence. The Parrot Club district was no more than a faraway anthill, lost on the horizon, vaguely illuminated but growing dimmer, like the trucks at the end of the road, where the night met the night.

All these convoys of trucks roaring across Germany roused Paul, made him want to move on, to move ahead. He called Nuremberg again. Ilse was not at the Parrot Club. The next night she was. She had not heard from Berlin and spoke in a curt voice. Paul decided to wait three more days. He wandered in the woods and spent an hour every evening at an old bookseller's who owned a large collection of antique books. No one ever looked at them; the well-to-do people in town were all engineers. Paul discovered a seventeenth-century treatise on alchemy and an illustrated botanical work from a century later. He took the latter on his walks and spent his evenings reading the alchemy text whose archaic language was beyond him. At the hotel, no one paid any attention to Paul. The local industries had always brought strangers into town. The old bookseller was a likeable and cultivated man. Paul never grew tired of listening to him.

He called Nuremberg again. No one was there. Two days later he gave it another try. Ilse answered. She seemed a bit drunk. People were laughing in the background. 'Maria? Oh my God, that's right!' She seemed to

move away for a moment. The laughter continued. 'Wait a minute. Yes, I have the address . . .' She dictated it to him, above the din, then hung up after a few casual good wishes. The next day Paul took the train as far as the main terminal, where he applied for some travel permits. They were granted him. Two days later, he arrived in Berlin.

17

As he approached the city, he noticed landscapes different from those which had surrounded him until then. Beyond its wooded hills and valleys, its narrow plains confined between mountainous horizons, Germany faced the wide open spaces of the north. Here Europe seemed to fade into a slow extinction.

Even though it was summer, the grey tones of the sandy earth, the whiteness of the birches, and the misty horizon all gave one the feeling of being swallowed up by infinite distance, the same impression given by fog rolling in over a prairie. The trees seemed somehow more worn-out and puny, the woods sparser, the ground paler, as though the world had gradually stripped itself in its flight to the north, leaving only the gleam of a faraway lake here and there, its wan reflection as poignant as faint words of farewell, or the last rays of the setting sun.

Ten, fifteen thousand kilometres of plains reaching from here to the north, opening before one like the palm of a gigantic hand. Everywhere, the same monotonous grey, the same birches, the same lakes whose shores are forever echoing with the cries of cold weather birds. Hundreds of millions of human beings, from Leeuwarden in Friesland to Pinkiang in Manchuria, live through this frozen summer, know this reality of the north, this absence of horizons, everything against which we protect our-

selves with comforting valleys, sloping wooded hillsides, streams running between steep banks, grasses stirring beneath their limpid surface, terraced vineyards, the warm shade of orchards buzzing with insects, towns complete with gables, steeples and legends, towns with flowered window-boxes, towns with white walls. From Leeuwarden to Pinkiang—everything against which we protect ourselves, by means of our self-consciousness, our poetic sentiments, our dreams, our labyrinths of love.

This did not mean that human beings were devoid of self-indulgence in the north, but what feats of determination, what persistence, what perversity was needed to justify such feelings in these bitter, forsaken surroundings. A natural bitterness, and perhaps a just bitterness. From Leeuwarden to Pinkiang, several million human beings had died during the war without creating any luxuriant landscapes in the world, or in the life of those who survived. Their deaths had dug no streams running between reeds and the roots of nut trees, no valleys; it had created no silent and shadowy orchards gilded with bees; no medieval or Renaissance-tinted cities, or even cities adorned with seventeenth-century sculpted balconies, none of these cities full of History, tranquillity, and sunshine, none of these orchards of the past; it had left nothing more than a rather cold plain on which the trees, the plants, even the houses were scattered further and further apart, as though they impeded flight, as though they were a distraction from the naked truth.

For these millions of human beings had died for the naked truth. No one had yet realized this, elsewhere. Truth hid from us and we helped conceal it, with our landscapes and all the reflections of the landscape within our minds. We were creatures made of leaves, fruit and flowers, like those painted by Archimboldo, sometimes

even creatures composed entirely of objects. Our Europe was going to be killed by a strong puff of wind; it was going to dry up, decay, or suddenly collapse. Then the north would overrun us and justice would be done.

Dying in battle, or worn out, or marked for ever by the war, we had fought for the north, for the north within us, without realizing it. Not for our dreams, not for our variegated landscapes. Without admitting it to ourselves, we had wanted something more than quiet orchards, for quiet orchards are deceptive, something more than streams, for streams never unravel anything in their endless winding, more than antique cities, for who among us, who live in the heart of them, has not sometimes wept out of disgust and hatred?

Of course it is hard to believe that we fought, and that millions of others, who knew no more than we did, died so that trade unions can now parade up and down along the stockades of Pink ing, on one of those dark October days that looks like snow, or so that, on a cold morning in Leeuwarden peasants with blue-veined cheeks can count out money for cows, in a world without horizons, a world in dismal flight, everywhere, further than the eye can see. But if we fought, if millions of other human beings died, it was for something 'further than the eye can see'. We drew strength from familiar landscapes, those within us and those around us. But the reason for our fighting and dying lay beyond them and now peace, also, lay beyond us.

Berlin. City of the north, city of justice, city of destruction. Destruction had opened the city to the space around it, to the rest of the continent, to truth. This city, where the ruins brought the sky down upon you in every direction, was not a destination. The journey had to continue, in one direction or another. One did not stop there, it was simply a place to take one's bearings. Political

bearings, as well, for Berlin was divided among the occupation troops of the four victorious nations. To Paul, the pivot of this double geography, that of the four points of the compass and that of the four Allied Zones, was the badly damaged church rising above the Kurfürstendamm, called the 'hollow tooth' because of its steeple, which was decapitated like an enormous broken fang.

Not far from this strange monument, which seemed less the result of a bombing than of an architectural folly, and which, on certain evenings when sepia storm clouds raged across the sky, transformed the gutted city into a kind of Piranesi vision, Paul found himself a hotel room. Without a special permit, it was hard for him to live outside the French sector, but since he was free to wander through the entire city, this restriction had little meaning.

There was a good deal of activity within the hotel which Paul, after his recent seclusion, was in a mood to enjoy. The people bustling about, foreigners for the most part, seemed to be living there. Some of them had a certain distinction, or affected an air of mystery which set them apart from the salesmen and businessmen who generally fill such medium-priced hotels. Paul surmised that they were officials belonging to the various international services which had mushroomed forth in the city because of its peculiar status.

Besides the French, who made up most of the clientele and who were the object of respectful attention on the part of the staff, there were men from all over central Europe, several Italians and even a few Asians whose business in the city Paul could not fathom. Even though he was French, Paul had the feeling that, in the eyes of both the employees and the guests in the hotel, he was included in this lot of foreigners, for it had become clear the first day that no official car was coming to meet him,

that he received no phone calls and that he apparently knew no one in the city.

The curiosity which he aroused turned to stunned surprise when he inquired at the desk about the street where Ilse had said he might find Maria.

'But sir,' replied the receptionist, looking at him with an almost fearful expression, 'that street does not exist any more. It was razed completely, and for once, it was a blessing.'

'A blessing?' asked Paul, surprised.

'Forgive me,' continued the receptionist in a contrite tone of voice, 'I didn't mean to say that. But the street does not exist, as I said. It does not exist any more.'

He went back to checking the registers.

'But what went on in that street, then?' asked Paul, his curiosity whetted by the receptionist's embarrassment.

The man, who was still young but pinched and sickly (no doubt he had been discharged for ill-health during the war) turned his head back towards Paul. On his face could be read the suffering and repressed anger of someone who is being tormented but who, restrained by a sense of what was proper in his position, or feeling helpless, is unable to reply.

He blushed slightly.

'Girls,' said someone who had approached the desk without Paul's noticing him. 'Lots of girls. Houses full of girls. One of them was called the "Ladder House". No one ever found out why. But it was famous.'

Paul began to laugh. He forced himself to laugh. He looked at the man who was talking to him. Fortyish, heavy, a pleasant round face, receding hairline: a criminal type by anthropometric standards, the latest swindler in the daily papers, the victim of violent reprisals. The man

walked away from the front desk and beckoned Paul to follow. Paul caught up with him.

'It's not there any more, that's true,' said the man. 'However, if you ever feel like a night on the town, I could show you . . . But why am I suggesting such things, when you didn't even know what used to go on there!' he continued, laughing.

'That's right,' said Paul, his thoughts elsewhere.

Ilse's rather vulgar humour, in giving him this false address, came as a surprise. However, he was not angry. He deserved this lesson. He couldn't expect to get away with bothering people, with making a fool of himself, week after week, over a girl who was so worthless. By sending Paul to a Berlin street which no longer existed, but whose name continued to be a symbol of prostitution, Ilse and her friends at the Parrot Club were reminding him that all his idealism could not change the fact that Maria sold herself to anyone who came along, and enjoyed it. Actually, he had never forgotten this, and the thrust at his idealism was unjustified. His search for Maria gave him a purpose, something to do with all the time on his hands, now that he was a walking dead man. He was postponing a loneliness whose meaning was not yet clear to him.

'Perhaps you knew someone who used to live there? After all, there were perfectly respectable people along the street, as well as the girls,' the man continued.

His accent revealed that he was not German.

'Is this the first time you've been in Berlin?'

Paul nodded.

'If I can help you in any way . . .'

Why this sudden friendliness? Paul looked back at the man, who was now offering him a cigarette.

'You're not German?'

'No, Polish. My name is Skrynkoski. But they call me Skryne, for short. I've been here over a year.'

He told Paul that he belonged to a committee which had been sent to recover Polish property stolen by the Germans during the war. Out of courtesy, Paul had to reveal his own name and the reason he had come to the city. Nothing professional, just curiosity. History was being made in Berlin, and he wanted to get a glimpse of it. Skryne agreed and began talking about the city with enthusiasm. He asked Paul to join him in the bar.

'... not a real city: a huge Prussian village. A hundred years ago, there was almost nothing here. We didn't destroy more than a century of German civilization. Including the street you were looking for ...'

He was looking at Paul with a gleam of malice in his eyes. Paul felt that he could no longer hide the reason why he had asked for the street. He explained that he was looking for a girl. He had met her in Franconia, some time ago. The address had been a bad joke which someone had played on him.

'Oh, a romantic interest. I see.' He seemed disappointed. He looked at his watch and emptied his glass.

'Romantic is perhaps not quite the word,' said Paul, wounded by the contempt which he sensed in Skryne's words. 'In the first place the girl was a prostitute, at least part of the time. So as far as romance was concerned, you can imagine ... No, it's something else again ... It's hard to explain.'

'I know, I know,' Skryne replied, his interest apparently reviving. 'In this city, discretion is the rule. But why don't you go to the police? This young woman is no doubt ... in their files.'

'I'd rather not get involved with the police.'

When he took a room in this hotel, where the list of

guests was certainly under careful scrutiny by the police, for an atmosphere of political anxiety reigned in this divided, devastated city which had become a crossroad for the world, a crossroad for ideas, Paul had counted on the distance between Berlin and the rest of Western Germany. He had counted on the insularity of the city. The Soviet zone which spread out into Lower Saxony made it an island linked to the rest of Europe only to the west, by the umbilical cord of the railway and the highway.

In a vast, rather sandy expanse, planted with slender pines, black timber forests, and brightened by a lake—the Tiergarten and its surroundings—the inhabitants of the city wandered in circles. Paul went there the morning after he arrived, to relax after his journey and to absorb the atmosphere of Berlin before looking for Maria. In this corner of Prussia—also low—covered with mist from the Spree River, in this setting of ruins where the nations had chosen to meet, there was nothing for the ordinary man. Nothing but a tree, lost in the garden of an undistinguished modern villa, the tree at the foot of which Kleist had killed himself, one evening or one morning; it had never been quite clear why.

It had never been quite clear to Paul why he was in Berlin, either, or why this melancholy came over him. But no, it was something worse than melancholy, for melancholy reflects, in its own way, the natural order of things, while this absurd lake in the middle of the city, shining like tin, with the land in flight all around, these green plants in the shadows, at the foot of Kleist's tree, did not seem to belong to the world at all. Paul now remembered that Kleist had killed his mistress first; he had met death 'halfway', as a peasant would say about the land. All of a sudden, while he spun his glass nervously on the centre

of the bar, Paul wondered if perhaps he did not desire to die with Maria.

Was this the reason he had been looking for her for so long? Why should they die together? Desire, in an extreme form, mingled with mutual sadism? At the end of love lies death, like a last, forbidden, seductive door. It is the secret goal of our desire, just as it is for certain insects who couple and die. At no other moment in life do we pass so far beyond ourselves as we do in this curious act, this gasp which sums up the species. One second longer, and it would be our last. But why Maria? Perhaps because, like Paul, she was uprooted from where she belonged, cast aside, swept along in the momentum of the times in the untrammelled motion of loneliness. If, in the midst of all this endless, meaningless wandering, he could stop, hold her to him, hold himself to her, escape into a realm of immobility . . .

'You are probably wise not to go to the police,' pursued Skryne. 'Besides, you haven't any specific credentials, or perhaps your credentials, shall we say, are all too specific. . . . Don't worry, I'm not questioning you. I have a lot of pull with the police, because of my work. I'll get some information for you. What's the girl's name?'

Paul gave him Maria's last name, her age, the town where she was born.

'But she belongs to us!' said Skryne. 'That town is on the other side of the Oder River, in the territory we won back from the Germans. Stolen property!' He started to laugh. 'I'm joking. Don't think that we're going to trot around after all the German men and women who have run off. All too happy to be rid of them. It's just that her origins will give me a chance to inquire about her more freely at police headquarters. It's all to your advantage!'

Skryne's enthusiasm began to trouble Paul. He wanted to calm the Pole's eagerness.

'Now don't make a big fuss over this. It's not worth the effort.'

'Are you afraid?' asked Skryne.

'Afraid of what? What in the world would I be afraid of?' said Paul. 'If you only knew! All this is so unimportant, so trivial.'

He meant what he said. He felt in a state of extreme lucidity. The two drinks, perhaps, which he had downed in quick succession?

'You're wrong,' replied Skryne. 'There is nothing trivial in Berlin; everything has a meaning. It's the atmosphere of the city. You arrived with the most commonplace of problems. A few thousand people here are ready to find a meaning in it, to make you see it, in spite of yourself, in a new light.'

'The world is full of people whose troubles remain hidden, whose final meaning is never understood. That's not possible here. Your little personal problems take on larger proportions, develop a broader significance. Because of them, as you will soon realize, you become involved in the world, involved with the rest of society. Love, for instance, to take the simplest example: before you know it, even love can take on political overtones. I say "political", though maybe that's not the most accurate word. It is History that we are living here. No one escapes it; you'll see. The fact that you are here in this city, that you are French, the fact that you are looking for a German girl, all that has the makings of a political incident, or, who knows, perhaps even an historical one . . . I will try to obtain some information about that girl of yours. It will mean one more step in the direction I have just described to you. You have to follow it. Soon

you will feel that your life is more significant . . .'

'A marxist,' said Paul to himself. 'Looking for converts. And the face of a pimp, besides . . .' However, he couldn't help feeling a certain warmth towards the man. He accepted his offer of help and promised to meet him in the same spot the following evening. Meanwhile, he walked for hours through the city, looking for signs of the political and historical awareness of which Skryne had spoken.

Nothing in the behaviour of the people in the streets suggested that they were particularly involved in the destiny of mankind. They formed a colourless mass, a stream of under-nourished, anonymous faces; phantoms rather than heroes of History. Back and forth through the ruins, along the avenues which were wide to begin with and now spilled out in all directions, along tree-shaded promenades, past dingy white villas whose rough plastered walls were sometimes pitted with bullet-holes, the patter of their feet, their silence, and empty stares eventually became as disturbing to behold as the sight of the devastated city.

Disturbing especially because of a feeling of unreality. Destruction alone would have aroused only grief or melancholy. At the sight of a house without a façade or floors, its one last wall like a windswept billboard, with strips of flowered wallpaper loosened by the rain, one's heart sank, and that was all. And the signs which still hung on a broken bit of construction, bearing the name of a merchant or craftsman, of course had a certain dejected quality, as lacking in dignity as the death of an umbrella salesman, crushed beneath the rubble. What can you expect? Such emotions at least left you on firm ground; though it was a pity that this same ground was so easily littered with rubbish and corpses.

The uneasiness began with certain buildings which were still standing. Towards evening one could look into these lone structures, erect as towers or lumbering as fortresses, their proportions exaggerated by the surrounding nakedness, and, through gaps or blown-out windows, catch glimpses of emptiness, hollowed into tunnels or vast naves. Sometimes, perforated on all sides, they stood outlined against the clear night sky, like great pieces of black coral, or limestone pitted by the sea, then, at dawn, they closed up again, became silos filled with silence, whose shadows would move around over the city all day. The impression of weirdness came from the resemblance these vestigial structures bore to natural phenomena, to accidents of erosion, or, at least, to the monoliths of prehistory.

How could Skryne talk about History being accentuated, about politics permeating everything, in such a setting as this? It was more conducive to dreams, to a fascination for death. Here, war had not revived a sense of social responsibility, but rather, had created a twilight zone of survival, into which Paul sank deeper, day by day. He began to feel that, having staged a make-believe death, with his car accident, he could no longer retrace his steps and that now, in spite of himself, he was gradually being forced to make his disappearance come true.

No doubt the superstitious belief that lies are contagious, that one lie leads to another, was at the bottom of this. The delicious anxiety which Paul felt at the thought that he and Maria might die together, was a sign of a relentless fatality whose wheels had been set in motion by his bogus accident. From now on he carried this fatality within him. Towards evening, he put an end to his wandering in the ruined sector and hurried back to the Kurfürstendamm where a semblance of normal life had

begun again in the last few months; he was afraid of going out of his mind. It was with a sense of relief that he joined Skryne again a little later. The Pole had not been able to obtain any information about Maria.

'I suspected that you wouldn't,' said Paul, smiling. 'She kept away from the police.'

'Now don't give up, and don't pretend you're glad, either,' replied Skryne. 'Underneath you want to find this girl and to continue along the path you have begun. I will keep trying.'

He investigated further, and found nothing. However, a real friendship was arising between Skryne and Paul. The Pole introduced Paul to some of his countrymen and a few Germans whom he knew. He took him to the various establishments where girls hung out. Paul did not find Maria. After so many efforts on his behalf, Skryne began to win his confidence, and Paul told him, in detail, everything that had happened in his life since the end of the war. The Pole listened with interest.

'Why didn't you say anything earlier about your disappearance and the forged gas coupons?' he cried, when Paul had finished. 'You can't go around under your real name any more; it's a great risk. I can get you some flawless German identity papers. Just have a few photographs made. I'll take care of the rest, I know the right people for this. When you have the new papers, all you have to do is move to another hotel.'

Paul hesitated. He blamed this on the sum of money he would have to pay, which Skryne had quoted to him. In reality, however, the fact that he was asked to pay for the papers reassured him. He would have been wary, had someone encouraged him to change his name in order to exploit or use him. Noticing Paul's indecision, Skryne did not pursue the matter. He changed the subject.

'Perhaps you are right about the identification papers,' said Paul, all of a sudden. 'I'll bring you the photographs tomorrow.'

Once again he felt a strange pleasure. Ever since the car accident, his name had been a burden to him. It prevented him from knowing complete freedom. This time, Paul would become someone else, or rather, he would become no one at all, since the identity which he would acquire was spurious and even more abstract than the name of a dead man. He found it somewhat unpleasant, however, to use a German name. He felt as though he were joining the ranks of those who had inflicted such humiliations upon him, such suffering; he felt as though he were turning against himself. He disregarded these feelings. After all, he still kept, for the day when he felt the need to return to his own personality, even for a moment, the papers which bore his name, and the name of the faraway town where he had been born. Skryne reminded him of this.

'If you find yourself among Frenchmen here in Germany, you simply resume your true nationality, that's all.'

Paul became more attentive; why would he find himself among Frenchmen here in Germany? But he kept his curiosity to himself and asked Skryne only whether he was still looking for information about Maria.

'No, I've done all I can for the time being,' replied Skryne. 'In a few days, we will start a thorough investigation, as my friends in the police would say.'

These words, 'my friends in the police', often appeared in his conversation. Paul was surprised that a radical would be so friendly with those who protected bourgeois interests, or at least what was left of them. He could not help pointing this out to Skryne.

'What an outmoded way of looking at things!' replied

the Pole. 'It is true that in the West my affiliations might be interpreted in such a narrow sense, with a certain amount of justice. There, society and the struggles within it are simple, straightforward. But here! The political complexities in this city, why you have no idea! . . . As elaborate as a living organism, with veins, arteries, a network of capillaries, multiple cells. And pathology, everywhere Reaching into the police itself. Mutations, insidious infections, antibodies swarming just where you least expect them. Berlin is alive with politics, into its remotest extremities. It is a living, breathing organism. We are its health, you and I, and a few million others; but tonight, especially you and I.'

Paul pointed out to Skryne that, flattering as his comparison might be, he did not feel it was quite justified. In what way was he, Paul, contributing to the health of the world?

'You're thinking of your own ideas, or your absence of ideas, as far as politics is concerned,' Skryne said to him. 'But what is interesting, is not what is in your head, but who you are: your social origins, your background, your awareness and availability. Your expectations, that's what matters. Your expectations for the world . . .'

He paused for a moment, his forehead wrinkled in thought.

'A hundred thousand cubic metres of concrete, three hundred thousand cubic metres of earth . . .' he continued, as though to himself. 'These are figures referring to the construction of a dam, somewhere in the East . . .' He rarely mentioned particular countries, using only these two vague categories: East and West, which he uttered with a certain solemnity, as though they had been the two poles of a religious duality, a Manichaean doctrine. ' . . . men moved all that, under terrible conditions. With

enthusiasm? No. With patience. An extraordinary patience. The patience of those who expect a new world, who know it will come. . . . And you, idle as you appear to be now, you are already with them, you are helping with that dam. You cannot be elsewhere. You are looking for that girl who is perhaps the lowest little whore of all, but that doesn't matter; you are looking for a human being. You are moving in the right direction. There are ways of waiting for a girl which pave the way for the dams of the future.'

'You are a real missionary,' Paul would say to Skryne, with a smile.

The Pole's arguments, in which he could pick out a number of sophistries, nevertheless made Paul think. Each time they brought him back to what was a familiar private conflict. He belonged to a generation and a social class in whom marxism aroused the same fervour, the same uncertainties, as religious faith had roused at the early part of the century, in young people who were still guided by conventional wisdom, tradition, or metaphysical anxiety. Here in this city, the scenes of devastation, the barren grey of the north which Paul confronted every day, in his wanderings along the avenues or in the suburbs, could offer him a new lesson in hardship, a new invitation to action, rather than to despair.

Paul had a vague feeling that the confusion which reigned in his mind could be settled only by some kind of grand simplification. And perhaps the only such simplification readily available to him was the political system which Skryne was glorifying. To become immersed in a collective society, blinded by a communal faith, was perhaps the best way to escape oneself. Suicide into the masses . . . But one does not die, one steps aside for virtue. The Pole's political catechism touched the foundations of

traditional thought, quite deeply in fact; in his rather novel dialectic, the individual was literally replaced, cast aside in favour of a purer 'virtue'.

Meanwhile, the replacements and transformations which were taking place reflected nothing more than the dismal intrigue of this city, seething with black market negotiations, espionage, forgery of every variety. One evening Skryne came into Paul's room saying:

'Good evening, Herr Müller!'

He pulled some papers out of his pocket.

'The most original name they could come up with was Heinrich Müller. But that's just as well - it will pass anywhere. The identity card is perfect. Then there are discharge papers, and a clean legal record.'

Paul examined the documents, turning them over in his hands. The photograph, next to the name which identified it, had a weird quality: the portrait of a dead man. How had he come this far? Everything was happening as it does in those dreams in which you find yourself on a train, unable to get off at the right stop, and are carried to another destination where you are met by a group of forbidding, all-powerful figures, one of whom resembles a schoolmaster who made you tremble, long ago, or a tyrannical father, or an officer who once humiliated you. . . . All beneath a curious storm-coloured sky. Having become Heinrich Müller, Paul felt as though he had fallen under the sway of mysterious forces.

'Herr Müller, I was able to find you a room at the Crown Hotel, not far from here,' Skryne said to Paul.

Paul moved there that very evening. He was surprised at how docile he had become. At the same time he noticed that since Skryne had started calling him 'Herr Müller', obviously as a joke and smiling as he did so, his voice had a slightly more imperious tone. A barely perceptible

nuance, which in itself might be part of the humour, the words 'Herr Müller' implying a dry Germanic toughness. But there was still a peremptory tone in what he said. The next day, Paul entreated the Pole to go on calling him by his true name.

'Why certainly,' said Skryne. 'I only used the other so that you would get used to your new personality. Absent-minded as you are, you might have forgotten it right away. You have to learn to start when you hear someone say it behind you. It is hard to react to any name other than one's own, I know. But don't worry, to me you will never be Herr Müller. In the first place I hate Herr Müller.'

'So do I,' said Paul, without knowing why, but with perfect sincerity.

'Bravo!' cried Skryne. 'The transformation has begun. You are transferring what you don't like about yourself to your new personality. Who is Herr Muller?'

'Some bourgeois German, I imagine,' said Paul.

'That's right, a bourgeois fellow. German or French, it doesn't make much difference. His nationality means very little to him. He drops it very easily in order to take advantage of the world. The world as it is. He doesn't question anything.'

'There you're wrong!' cried Paul.

'Now remember, I'm talking about Herr Müller,' said Skryne, firmly. 'The Müller side of you, if you prefer. This man—Müller—marries a young German woman who owns horses, meadows, tenant farms, forests. For him it is a place where he can retreat and forget the world. . . . Now you can't contradict me there: Herr Müller used those very words himself, in front of me, the other day. . . . To forget the world means to forget that the benefits we enjoy are part of the world, that the

retreat would not exist without the world, and that if it stopped existing, we would never know the noble joys of forgetting the world. Monks and priests have been cheating in this way for centuries.

'We are all bound together. No stone is broken anywhere in the world that does not concern us, that does not echo in our minds. You can plug your ears all you like; the world remains a single whole. And Herr Müller knew that. But he still wanted to take advantage of it. He had a bourgeois view of life. He disguised it beneath the poetry of the forest. Herr Muller was poor.'

'Rest assured, he still is.'

'True, he was not accepted. Then he tried to sublimate his failure, in death, a false death. Herr Muller can loiter around Europe for centuries if he chooses, in hiding, continuing to fill up the files in the bureau of lost persons; we are no longer concerned with him. But he had a companion, a *doul'e* . . .'

'I see what you are getting at,' said Paul. 'Your little parable is quite apt.'

'Don't interrupt me, Herr Muller!' Skryne replied, restraining himself from smiling, this time. 'As I was saying, he had a double. He had met a little tramp of a girl. He hadn't fallen in love with her. No. But he had felt something, found something. Do you know what it was? In her he had discerned his own poverty, his own truth. He had discovered the world . . .'

' . . . The brotherhood of the world.'

'No, not brotherhood. That would be too simple. Do you think you are still in school? He had discovered the world the way it really is, a monolith, but showing lines of cleavage. In short, the world of which he could not take advantage.'

'But where does Herr Müller fit in?'

‘There is not much left of him, just enough to be of use. For once he will be useful: as a façade, a reassuringly dull and mediocre façade, a puppet which can be stuffed with everything one wants to get rid of, someone with a recognized social status. . . .’

Heinrich Müller’s identity card gave ‘translator’ as the profession of its bearer. With his savings nearly exhausted, Paul was thinking of giving French lessons again. He had asked for this title on the card, as it did not require any university degree. Could Skryne, whose contacts seemed endless, find him some pupils? Paul was drawn more and more to seeking help from the Pole, in everything that had to do with the practical side of his life. He put himself in his hands, and, in doing so, felt a sense of security. Sometimes he told himself that he was in love with the man and was acting, without realizing it, the way a woman would have acted.

‘I can see you more easily as a translator in some French agency,’ Skryne replied, when Paul told him of his plan to give lessons. ‘It’s more interesting. You learn things. You meet people with influence. I could help you find something like that. Not just now. The right opportunity has to come along. Be patient for a while. And if you need anything, money for instance . . .’

Paul, who for some time now had begun to understand what kind of activities Skryne was really involved in, under the pretence of retrieving Polish art treasures, felt a sharp anxiety when he heard these words. But he said nothing. There would be time enough to pull out when he was asked to compromise himself. Several weeks then passed during which Skryne said nothing about his project. He suddenly seemed very busy and often would spend nearly a week at a time without seeing Paul. One evening he telephoned, and asked Paul to have dinner

with him in a little restaurant in a very inaccessible part of town, and asked him to get there on his own. While they were eating, Skryne was most cordial. He asked Paul to forgive him for his long absences. So much to do, so much to worry about, these last few weeks!

'We have to start working on your affairs again. First of all, that girl you're looking for. There's nothing more to be done here; I've covered the whole territory. There is still a remote chance that she is in the Soviet sector. Prostitution and the black market are not unknown there. Since such activities are punished more severely and are less common, they are also more profitable. Some girls are tempted. I'll send you to friends of mine who can help you. They can get you permits for the entire zone, as far as the Oder or the Baltic, if you feel like it. Travel around; take your time; I'll see that you won't have any trouble.'

Paul decided to go. He was curious to see the other Germany, curious, too, about Skryne's plans for him, which would no doubt be disclosed during the course of the journey. The morning Paul left the hotel, the Pole gave him a small package and asked him to slip it in his pocket. 'Some Dutch cigars for our friends. Your letter of recommendation is inside.'

Paul left without baggage. Should he wish to spend any time on the other side, he would be supplied with whatever he needed. He had to pass from one zone to the other as an ordinary French sightseer. Skryne took back Paul's German identification papers. Herr Muller would remain in West Berlin. He did not have enough imagination to undertake a journey of this nature.

Paul took a taxi and passed, without difficulty, through

the Brandenburg gate. He asked the driver to take the Wilhelmstrasse, along which the blackened façades of official buildings rose like a stage set. Large empty spaces extended on all sides, swelling in one spot into a grey, rather indistinct mass: the concrete shelter where Hitler died. While the ruined buildings, in the gloomy baroque of late nineteenth-century Germany, suggested the scenery for an opera, hastily dismantled or interrupted by a catastrophe, this now famous bunker was barely noticeable and, in spite of its dark history, was no more inspiring than a cistern or an electric transformer surrounded by rubble.

The no-man's-land of History. By preserving the dreary monotony of this place where the Third Reich had breathed its last, by leaving it without an inscription of any kind, even a vindictive one, the Russians probably intended to inflict still further punishment upon their dead enemies, something equal to the infamy of the anonymous mass graves. Perhaps it was their way of repudiating the reverence for History which, out of the ambivalence of fame, often leads to unexpected rehabilitations. They wanted to return to a quasi-physical view of mankind, to see progress as a succession of geniuses liable to putrefaction, to strip men's destiny of all mystique, and to lay the foundations of his future amidst the rubble.

The faces in the crowd, in this part of the city, could make one believe in such a view. They were greyer here than elsewhere, looked in cautious silence, ruminating their hunger. Notices on the walls announced proletarian gatherings. It was the East: more than just a different country—a different season, a different age. Even the war which had laid waste to this sector seemed to be a different war from the one which had destroyed the western part of the city. Here it had been fought in the streets, along the

brick walls. It was barely over and these men who walked with their heads down, carrying old sacks, were like the scavengers who appear the morning after a battle, picking up the empty cartridges to sell to some scrap metal dealers.

Paul got out at the address Skryne had given him. It was a shabby office building, without any signs to indicate the nature of the business being carried on there. The doors bore only roman numerals. Paul went into office number XII, as Skryne had told him. Three rather young men were sitting at tables in the first office, beyond which could be seen another room with a cot in it. In a little alcove, behind a half-open door, a man was brewing coffee.

Once inside, Paul gave his name and handed over the box of cigars. While one of the men, the thinnest of the four, with his hair clipped short, took the box into the next room, the others asked Paul to sit down. The conversation began stiffly.

'So you are a friend of Skryne's? We haven't seen him for some time. Apparently he is very busy.'

The man who had taken the box of cigars did not come back right away. How could it take so long to read a simple letter of introduction? They offered Paul some coffee. It was undrinkable. A few remarks were exchanged about France and then there was silence again. Finally the other man came out of the next room.

'It's microfilm,' he said to the others.

'Do you mean the package I brought?' asked Paul, suddenly alarmed.

'Yes,' replied the man. 'Of course there were cigars around it.'

'Why didn't Skryne tell me? That's a breach of confidence!' cried Paul, getting up from his chair.

The man smiled and served some more coffee.

'He was afraid you would get nervous. He says so in his letter.'

Paul did not, in fact, feel any anger and was only trying to maintain his dignity. What the man had just said troubled him in a curious way. Skryne had spoken of his nervousness, the evening before, after also pointing out his absent-mindedness. These were faults which Paul did not recognize in himself, but he did not mind the fact that Skryne attributed them to him. Not only is our indulgence drawn to faults like these, but our own need to indulge leads us to invent or exaggerate them in others. Such smiling reprimands express the friendship, the tenderness which is frequently their only basis.

'Did he ask you to tell me what was in the box?' he asked.

'Yes,' said the man. 'He thinks that it is sometimes a good idea to take the first step without knowing it.'

'There is no reason to think that there will be others,' replied Paul. 'I am going back to the other side.'

'It's up to you,' said the man. He sat down and began to drink his coffee, with evident pleasure. 'Just the same, I might point out to you that this letter "covered" you; it was proof of your innocence. If a policeman in the western sector had taken the package from you, he would have seen that you were a dupe.'

Paul did not answer.

'In the letter he also mentions a girl you are looking for,' continued the man. 'Is it all right with you if we try to find her? If we succeed, we'll get in touch with you.'

The three other men had begun to read the papers spread out in front of them, and did not seem to be listening.

'Why should she be here?' asked Paul. 'Why would

anyone ever think of coming over to this side? You don't realize; everything here is grim, grey, deserted. It's obvious the minute one crosses the dividing line between the two sectors. In some places, the pavements haven't even been repaired. Poverty everywhere. And political propaganda staring at you from all sides—the only thing that is orderly and clean around here, one has to admit. But what good does that do? What can you offer people to bring them back, to make them want to come back?

'Justice,' replied the man, in a calm voice, 'an attempt at justice. I was in a concentration camp until the end of the war, and I still chose this.'

'Some people have, of course. And no one likes to contradict himself'

'All right, let's say it was stubbornness. But hasn't it ever occurred to you that there must be more than that, something more than that, in most cases? If I tell you that there has been a communist system in existence somewhere in the world for nearly thirty years, you will tell me it was built on totalitarian authority and terror. If I tell you that several million men died for this system, more than seven thousand of them in this town alone, you'll say that discipline and patriotism explain everything. If I go on to point out that tens of millions of human beings in the world believe in the virtues of such a system, and despite a certain absence of freedom, despite certain necessary violence, believe that it is good according to the precepts of traditional morality, you will say that even stranger forms of masochism have been known to exist. But you won't have convinced me. There is no such thing as collective insanity.'

'What about the Nazis?'

'That didn't take hold. They exploited the socialist longings of a people gone astray, but nationalism and the

fanatic race hatred which was the true expression of Nazism could only lead to the chaos of war.

'No, believe me, perhaps communism as it exists now is not saying much, but the crucial thing is that it is trying to say something. The men you see here in this room and the tens of millions of others I just mentioned, accept communism only insofar as they wish to create it.'

'To reform it, you mean.'

'If you wish; everything which is growing is constantly being reformed, improved. But one can only contribute to this progress from within. One can do nothing from the outside.'

'One can carry microfilms.'

'Anyone could have done that. There was nothing very dangerous in that little job. Don't get the idea that they were military secrets or something like that. No. Only records of former Nazis. Over there in the West, they are being given back their official positions. We may find it useful, as the occasion arises, to be able to point to their past in public, with documentary evidence.'

Paul was only partly relieved. He knew that he was living in an era when propaganda was often the most effective weapon of all. In the eyes of those who thought he belonged to the West, because of his nationality, he had made himself guilty of treason, by delivering these records. The truth was that his only worry was his own safety. He did not feel any guilt, for, since the end of the war, he no longer felt in any way bound by his origins, or automatically obliged to defend the cause of the country where he was born.

What was France to him? A sum of landscapes, nothing more, landscapes he had loved, but without that sense of possession which would have made him feel close to them. France, in his eyes, was inhabited by millions of

passers-by, who, French as they were, spent their lives circling endlessly over a land where nothing belonged to them. Patriotism obliged them to be satisfied with more subtle advantages, which were conceded, however, only because no one yet had the power to withhold them: the music of the language, art treasures, that common past which is called culture, a taste for wine, and, of course, the landscapes. Always the landscapes. But once he has had any experience of the world, of life, is there anyone who is not glugged with landscapes? They swarm in his mind and overlap one another, at the mercy of emotions which the law cannot touch.

The landscapes were free, as were the language and genius of Racine, the cathedrals, the eighteenth century and its inimitable rationalism, and the taste for wine. Paul loved all that, but loving France would have meant being false to the anger within him. What did he care about that 'defence of the west' now being formulated by the world? He knew that the happiness of his fellowmen could not be drawn up in terms of strategy. The West offered freedom, of course, but for the poor, freedom is still a barren word. By delivering the documents, Paul had not been a traitor. His clear conscience allowed him to accept an invitation to lunch from the man who had held forth to him at such length, who appeared to be the superior of the other three. His name was Friedhelm. Paul had calmed down, but maintained a certain aloofness in his manner to show that he did not forgive Skryne for making a dupe of him.

His attitude did not discourage Friedhelm from making him a proposition, after lunch. The German authorities in the zone occupied by the Russians wanted to give the rest of the world the sight of a regenerated country. A magazine was being prepared, which would review all the

advances being made in the east, in the realm of science and literature, as well as in reconstruction. It was to appear in several languages. For the French edition, a 'supervisor' was needed, who would be able to point out awkwardnesses to the translators and to suggest to the editors a journalistic format which would appeal to the taste of the French public. Friedhelm asked Paul to accept this position. He would receive a very satisfactory salary. Paul was instantly tempted; he was weary of idleness and his savings were running out. However, he asked for some time to think it over and went back to the French sector that very evening. He was not able to find Skryne until two days later.

'You made a fool of me, all right.'

'Don't be silly,' said Skryne, a note of familiarity appearing in his voice. 'I'm helping you find yourself. You have a fascinating life ahead of you. Did you take the job they offered you? I arranged it all. It's a temporary position. You have more important things to do on this side, but one can't rush things . . .'

Paul forgot his resentment. There was an affectionate tone in Skryne's voice which he found touching. He replied that he did not like the idea of living in the Soviet sector. The atmosphere was even more dismal there than on this side. Above all, he had realized that Skryne's absence would be painful to him. Was the Pole aware of this?

'That's just because you were dealing with Friedhelm and his group,' Skryne replied. 'They can be pretty tiresome with all their theories. They wouldn't know how to show you what's really interesting over there. I'll have work to do there soon; to see if there is anything they forgot to give back to Poland --the usual thing. I'll give you a little tour.'

They spent the evening together. Skryne was making

plans: he would take Paul to Poland. Warsaw was being reconstructed, everything as it used to be, even the churches. The land had been divided up . . .

‘What about Maria?’ Paul asked, at one point.

‘You’ve gone beyond that now,’ said Skryne. ‘It was interesting for a while, and even rather touching, so long as you had nothing better to do.’

‘What if I was really in love with her?’

Well then, we would go on looking. Because we will never abandon you now, do you understand? Never.’

These words frightened Paul, and at the same time they filled him with excitement. He had the feeling that he stood on the last bridge to Europe. From the other bank where the north began, where there were other reasons for living, other ways to speak of love, a community as vast, as dangerous, and as tempting as the sea, hands reached out to him, already gripping his own. Even if he had denied France a hundred times, because of the sufferings which he had known there, which she had permitted; even if he had for ever repudiated her landscapes, where the middle class stops to chat beneath trees which belong to them; even if he had forgotten everything, the language included, he still would have felt a kind of secondary loyalty, would always be at home in this jigsaw puzzle of nations, set apart by the sea on one side and the great plain of the north on the other.

A European. But the world still had an abstract ring to it, a ludicrous echo of feudalism, which in no way suggested that sense of geological familiarity, the sense of having been there before, in which to pass from one country to another becomes no more than a change of customs, a parade of colours, as bright and disorderly as the maps which hang in over-heated classrooms, which we stared at throughout childhood and adolescence. Was

this to say that the east and the north were a completely foreign world to Paul? For the landscape, yes; for the people living in it, yes at first glance but then again no. For somewhere within this world was a light which reached way beyond memory, like the light in a meadow full of birches, one morning in winter, or in spring. Somewhere in this world was a new taste which Paul suddenly discovered that he had been missing without knowing it: the taste of milk in a pail, of horses, of the cold.

But this was nothing yet. Beyond this last bridge where Paul, and others like him, lingered in spite of themselves, devoured by a nostalgia for the suffering they had known, still fascinated by the cathedrals of injustice rising behind them, those never-to-be-equalled cathedrals, beyond this, lay a glorious poverty, the poverty of plains scattered here and there with copses of birch. There was the miracle of being born from nothing, the miracle of finding one's nobility in poverty, in abject beginnings, in a past full of humiliation. But every birth has its pains. Paul pointed this out to Skryne.

'Well, so be it,' he replied. 'Let every country keep a reckoning of what it destroys, and weigh the total. I'm talking about death in all its forms. There are countries where thousands of men get shot at just for standing erect. The shot that kills them—in the body—would not be the one that hurt the most.'

'Never mind. What about all the trials over there, the purges?'

'When it comes to a choice between the death of one man and the well-being of everyone . . .' Skryne began. '. . . and besides, why be so concerned over individual deaths, isolated cases, justified by the circumstances!' he went on, exasperated. 'We are building dams, modern cities, in a new spirit, with values entirely different from

those which oppressed us, at an extraordinary, exhilarating pace, but, in the midst of all this, death stays what it has always been, ancient and awesome. And so, in the eyes of the world, we will always be murderers. All the life we are creating, bettering, means nothing. One man dies and we become black with shame. But I ask you: who was that man?’

‘The answer lies in the question: one man, one irreplaceable life.’

‘No life is irreplaceable. Life is not in each of us; it is in all of us together.’

It was under the influence of these words that Paul crossed what he called ‘the bridge’. However, he kept paths open for retreat. He would spend four or five days in the Soviet sector, checking the articles in the new review, editing them, taking part in political meetings, in discussions, and then he would go back to the western sector. Encouraged to take a stand politically, he did no more than join a peace committee for which he drew up vague, well-intentioned resolutions.

These activities engrossed him enough so that the morbid fascination of the ruined city no longer held him in thrall. The company of Skryne and his friends filled up the gaps. Autumn had begun. It slipped by, into winter. With the help of the uncertain weather, the hermetically-sealed rooms, Paul fell entirely into the soporific rhythm of office routine. There were no landmarks in his life, except now and then, perhaps, the arrest of a colleague, a sudden political controversy, or a business trip through frozen Mecklenbourg. His brief affair with a secretary on the magazine, who wore peculiar woollen underwear which she knitted herself, left him no memories. Was this peace at last, the truth he had been seeking for so long? No. He confided in Skryne.

'I'm bored.'

'You used to be much more bored. This is a period of transition. I am just about to find you an interesting job, over on this side.'

'You're wasting your time. I don't have faith enough. I should have gone on looking for Maria. It seemed absurd, of course. But something told me I was on the right track. It seemed to be leading nowhere, but is what I am doing now leading anywhere? I'm going to start again . . .'

'To look for the girl?'

'Why not?'

'No reason at all. Except perhaps the fact that she's dead,' Skryne said calmly.

'How do you know?' cried Paul.

'Through the police, of course,' replied Skryne. 'What do you think I have all those contacts for? She was killed about a month before you got here. A drunken English soldier. Yes, an Englishman. Odd fellows, you know. I found this out when I got you the forged papers. I didn't tell you because you needed to believe in something. And besides, it's all rather pathetic. But, actually . . .'

He stopped short. Paul's piercing stare must have disturbed him. Dead. The thought did not take shape in Paul's mind and he repeated the word over and over to himself, just as, in front of a strange object or body, one might lean this way and that, hoping to find a familiar note, something to go by. But in vain. She was dead. There was nothing to understand. Just a long downhill slope. Paul was about to say to himself, 'If I hadn't sent her away from the stud farm. . . . If only I had gone with her.' But he shook off this responsibility. Somewhere there had been a drunken English soldier, the aftermath of war. Europe. Nothing more.

'So the war will never end,' said Paul, speaking to himself.

'Not by itself, no. We have to put an end to it,' replied Skryne. 'I showed you how. You saw, over there, and you will see, even more clearly, when you come with me to Poland, or to Russia, if you want to go all the way . . .'

Paul shook his head; he wasn't going. Suddenly the thought came to him that Skryne might be lying. What if Maria were not dead?

'I would like proof that she is dead,' he said curtly to Skryne.

'Very simple. Look in the back issues of any newspaper. Don't you trust me?'

'You have been lying to me for months now.'

'Out of kindness.'

'Was it also out of kindness that you made me carry incriminating documents without knowing what I was doing?'

'Yes, that was kindness, too. You seemed to be dying to join us. You didn't dare take the first step. From then on you moved by yourself, and quickly, too. Look where you are today.'

Paul felt anger rising within him.

'And now, of course, there's no going back. Cornered. All I can do is keep moving! Now you can finally tell me about Maria's death. No danger any more. They've got me on the hook on the other side, isn't that so? The victory is yours.'

'You, a victory?' Skryne exclaimed, laughing. 'My dear fellow, you really do take yourself seriously. No one was losing any sleep over you. I just wanted to help.' He stopped laughing. 'I'm very fond of you.'

'Another little white lie, I imagine,' said Paul, getting up from his chair. 'If you'll excuse me, I need to be alone.'

He walked towards the door, in the almost empty café.

'Goodbye, Herr Müller!' said Skryne.

Although loud, his voice had a slight catch in it. Paul could not help turning around. He had never seen this wan, impassive expression on Skryne's face. He felt an ache in his chest.

'Goodbye.'

He went out. The pavement was covered with icy mud. The snow was melting. Winter was nearly over.

Paul made up his mind not to return to the eastern sector, but, even though this meant he no longer had any reason to be there, he lingered on in Berlin. He did not even bother to move to another hotel, to avoid the people from the magazine and the peace committee who would surely come looking for him. The truth was that he wanted Skryne to be able to find him again. The Pole probably did not want to part with him so abruptly, as though he were offended. Paul, for his part, found that he harboured no grudge against him.

The fact that Skryne had deceived him made no difference as far as Maria's death was concerned. And now, this death assumed such proportions in Paul's mind that it did not occur to him to blame Skryne for not telling him right away. Paul felt neither grief, nor suffering. A sense of relief, rather, a terrifying sense of relief which robbed him of the anger to which he had yielded when face to face with the Pole. A sense of relief which made all Skryne's lies and stratagems seem like a childish game.

Why didn't he come back? For three days now, Paul had been walking the city again. Laid open in ruins, it stretched on all sides in vacant, dusty expanses, where in the distance builders were working to the whine of pulleys and the clang of steam shovels. In the unnatural light

reflected by the white, powdery rubble, these immense spaces recalled the airy perspectives of antique engravings, and brought a Roman majesty, a classical sense of space, into the heart of Prussia.

There Paul rediscovered the preoccupations from which Skryne's presence and his political activities had temporarily distracted him. There was truth somewhere and he had persuaded everyone who came near him of its existence, without their knowing it. Now Maria, the first of them, had died. She had found no peace anywhere; no one had let her find peace. Paul made himself see Maria's death as the consequence of an inner need, like his own. Where did the English soldier fit in? Paul made him serve the cause of destiny; soldiers are used to such a rôle. Yes, Maria had died to find a better sort of peace, out of spite towards a world where truth was drowned in the noise of reconstruction, the clang of steam shovels. She had done nothing to bring about her death, probably not the least little thing, but destiny had carried out its dark designs: the English soldier, knife in hand, had been lifted towards Maria by a giant crane, through the devastated city, along the black, scorched walls. . . . A nightmare vision. Paul felt his mind going, anxiety creeping up on him. Why didn't Skryne come back?

Paul decided to make the first move, to go and knock at the Pole's door. Self-respect, however, compelled him to wait a little longer; he would let three more days pass. He went on wandering through the city. He had begun to think of Lena. She, at least, had never been driven by any desire for truth. This had given her a kind of absurd integrity. She developed happily within the conventional framework of society, unquestioning, counting the horses from the window of her room where, just now, a man was about to enter: her new husband. She turned her head

around, and moved forward to meet him. She passed out of sight. How natural all this was! In thinking of it, Paul felt a profound sense of joy. By vanishing, he had set this life free, had allowed this innocence, simple as childhood, to blossom behind him.

One day when he was caught by the rain in the midst of his wanderings, Paul took refuge in an underground station. From there he could go directly back to his hotel. He was waiting for the right train to come along when, looking over at the opposite platform, he noticed a man who was nearly bald limping past the ticket gate. Peter Seiss! Paul was quite certain it was he, even though the man, bent over a newspaper, kept half his face hidden. Was this his victim? This inconspicuous functionary, an umbrella hooked over his left arm, who was reading the news, or some column which he followed every day, waiting for a train without looking, with that kind of blind instinct created by everyday routine?

His heart pounding, Paul struggled against a desire to cross the gangway between the two platforms and to approach Peter Seiss. What would the lame man say when Paul told him who he was? He would fluster, no doubt; protest his innocence, disown his past and, offering himself to Paul's inspection from head to foot, would plead that he was now no more than a hard-working German, who had given up the errors of his youth, who wanted no more of life than this daily ride, his liberal newspaper, a graduated pension plan, and peace for all the peoples of the world.

Paul might have yielded to his impulses, had a loud rumble not announced the arrival of the train which Peter Seiss would board. At the noise, the lame man raised his head, glanced at the tunnel and then, folding his newspaper, looked towards the platform where Paul was

standing. His eyes fell on Paul and were about to fix upon him when the train, coming out of the tunnel, shot between them. And so it happened that Paul never knew whether Peter Seiss had recognized him.

However, a strange pallor on the lame man's face somehow magnified the fixity of his gaze. Had it been prolonged, it would have proved clearly to Paul that he had been identified. This wan expression, these eyes like pools of darkness, perhaps the result of the dim lighting in the station, had a faraway look about them. Just as an invalid who has been taken out too soon, and who sometimes, under half-lidded eyes, goes back in his mind to his darkened room, his bedridden indolence, Peter Seiss, for one instant, even though perhaps he had not recognized Paul, had returned to dwell in the world where he had been a bloody, prostrate victim. A world both pleasant and painful, in which Paul and Peter Seiss would always know one another, for death was closing in upon both of them. One had risen again, one had fled and wandered endlessly, but neither was doing more than prolonging a temporary reprieve. Neither had found peace, and neither was really living, only exhausting himself in survival.

This encounter increased the anxiety which Paul had felt since he had learned of Maria's death and broken with Skryne. He began to think that the apparition of Peter Seiss on the underground platform had been a kind of hallucination. Sensing that in solitude he risked all kinds of mental aberrations, he resolved to wait no longer before looking for Skryne. The Pole's silence began to worry Paul, for he did not feel that he deserved to be abandoned so abruptly. He was equally surprised that the staff of the magazine and that of the peace committee had not sent anyone to check up on him.

In the middle of one of his walks, the day after his

meeting with Peter Seiss, he suddenly went into a café and telephoned the hotel where Skryne lived. Someone told him in a dry voice that Herr Skrynkoski was away. For how long? The man did not know, probably for a long time. When did he go away on this trip?

‘This morning, sir; he went away on this trip, as you say, just this morning.’

There was a sudden note of irony in the voice; then the man hung up.

Now extremely apprehensive, Paul went to the apartment of another Pole who was a friend of Skryne’s. He had occasionally been invited to dinner there. The friend was also away. His wife answered the door, first asking Paul’s name, without opening. The image of terror.

‘Skryne has just been arrested. My husband tried to get you on the telephone. Skryne had told him to warn you, in case of danger. You have to go straight over to the other side. My husband and our friends are there already.’

Because she was not involved, and had nothing to fear from the police, the woman was staying behind to watch for further developments. She expected a search at any moment, but precautions had been taken already.

‘Don’t stay here any longer, and don’t go back to your hotel. They are probably waiting for you. You were seen everywhere with Skryne and he spoke of you to everyone . . .’

She pushed Paul back outside. He felt a tightness in his heart. Why must he learn only now that Skryne had really felt affection for him? Friendship, which everyone described to him in the most appealing colours, was something he had never known. It had existed only as an image given him by others. Whether through inadvertence, shyness or distrust, Paul had remained half unaware

of this emotion, doubtless expecting to learn what it was like by hearsay.

'Paul was seen constantly in the company of Skryne, who spent the rest of his time talking about Paul to everyone.' This statement was unassailable in its simplicity. It was futile now to remember their misunderstandings, the incompatibility that had stood between them; they were locked in friendship. Friendship became one of those monuments erected by separation and absence. Prevented by Skryne's arrest from enjoying this bond, Paul was by the same token prevented from ever questioning it. So much of the nostalgia we suffer after a bereavement is based on something which never actually existed.

He had to flee. Paul was not afraid so much of the hardship of being in prison as of the absurdity of a trial. He had never embraced the cause which he had once served as an underling. He had no faith to stand by him, or loyalty to a higher cause which could illuminate the legal proceedings, and without which everything would be reduced to the level of a sordid criminal prosecution. To go over to the Soviet sector would be to accept a protection as paralysing as a judicial sentence would be on this side. He had to escape the partiality of this city, as oppressive in patronage as in persecution.

Above all, he had to start living again. With Maria dead, Peter Seiss swallowed up by the banality of everyday life, Skryne in prison, the voices which Paul thought he had heard would become fainter and fainter, for the truth which he sought had never spoken to him except through human beings, darkly. With Berlin behind him, he might perhaps be able to forget the war and the urges it had aroused within him.

He left everything and went straight to the airport. There he had to wait until evening for a plane to take him to Frankfurt where he arrived in the middle of the night. Fearing that the police had sent out a description of him, and having reason to believe that his double identity had been discovered, he resolved not to go to a hotel. He took refuge in the station waiting-room. In order to have access to it, he had to buy a ticket. As soon as he left Berlin, he had chosen his destination: Hirschenberg. He wanted to find out what had happened on the stud farm during the year since he had left.

While being careful to see that no one recognized him, he would make inquiries. He realized the dangers involved; his face was familiar to many people in the vicinity. But this was precisely what attracted him: the memories which his physical presence or the sound of his voice had left in others. He wanted to find himself as he had been in the recent past, fully alive, for, since his adventures had begun, he had felt himself gradually fading. . . . Arriving everywhere as a stranger, having lost his real name, facing a more profound loneliness with every day that went by, after having exhausted, one by one, the opportunities offered by his friends in Nuremberg and those in Berlin, he felt seriously threatened by that same social death which he had once thought to exploit.

It was not leading him to the light of understanding. He was beginning to realize that one can see only through the medium of those around us, that life only reveals itself to those who accept it, and that the loftiest truths lie buried deep in the commonplaces of everyday life. Truths that were unattainable, perhaps, but he, too, was one of those people of the shore who know only reflected

light. Salvation would never come to him through intellectual pride and if, one day, he reached understanding, it would be through humility and sacrifice.

He knew the world was imperfect; the thousand sorrows which haunted it were for ever reborn. Injustice towered higher than the birds crying out in the sky, and yet, on either side, the most ominous clouds were fringed with light. And it was this suggestion of peace, of the peace and happiness which were always there somewhere, which tortured him. A temptation: the sky, the bright clouds passing in the sky, silence, the beauty of everything, the cheek of a child, a woman's breast, flowers, and the seeds that follow. Autumn and autumn rain after summer; the eyes of friendship flaming in winter; a stone on the ground in an old garden in France, warmed by the sun; other stones, in other places, sculpted, and once, by chance, on a rainy day, in the damp, aromatic shadows of a cathedral, the God of our childhood rising to meet us. Every day of the calendar and the sweetness within each of them: a flash of joy on the most dismal morning in Paris, the branches of a fig tree in Brittany stirring gently as the sun breaks through the clouds, wheatfields transfigured at dawn, something in Germany, in Italy, in Poland, a child's happiness at the stroke of four, a cat, an old clock, a memory of love.

And this happiness was killing him. It was passing by; Paul could never catch up with it, could never lose himself in it, feel himself penetrated by the extraordinary incandescence that outlines the clouds, on those windy, half-bright days when the rays of the sun go on and off, as though someone were drawing the blinds. . . . He would have to accept everything: peace, unhappiness; he would have to dip into life blindfolded, take the seaweed with the fish, dust with the grain, death with

life—the pallor on the cheek of a child, the withering, tomorrow, of a woman's breast. And then one day, he might find wisdom, truth, in this transient equilibrium of contrasts, contradiction, suffering and joy. Who in the world has ever found a way to live outside the realm of not-quite-but-almost?

Having spent the night on a bench in the waiting-room, in a state of mounting anxiety, and finally of despair, Paul deliberately missed the morning train which he was to have taken. He had all the time in the world. He kept saying this to himself and yet, strangely enough, these hackneyed words added to the oppression he had felt ever since he left Berlin. 'All the time in the world.' He went down-town, found a public bath, and, once again, bought himself a new set of clothes and articles necessary for travel. He then found out that he had very little money left. Here, at least, he had his finger on the truth. He was making fun of himself, but at the same time he realized that all his recent efforts had been based on a deliberate contempt for conventional social obligations. He had sought truth 'in the abstract', relying on various shady little dealings to assure his daily bread. This was not playing the game.

He left for Hirschenberg that afternoon. On the way, he noticed white, recently constructed houses rising everywhere. Each was topped by a wide roof. Without style, but also without anything shockingly tasteless about them, the houses gave an impression of hygienic comfort. Even a little garden had been provided for, a half-acre surrounded by a rustproof iron fence. The embodiment of sensible social planning, in which peace, as a form of insurance against anything that might endanger the public welfare and social security, was

highly touted. Imperial Germany and romantic Germany had had their day, and no one was sorry. Now the good life was parcelled out in lots.

Above Hesse, and now, already, above that part of Lower Bavaria which looked almost Dutch, clouds were passing, March clouds, fringed with light. Soon spring would come, the second spring of peace, brighter because the dead were now forgotten. What about France? Paul would go back as soon as he had learned what had become of Lena. She had probably married again. Another glimpse of peace. Then he could leave the country without regrets! Why then this relentless feeling of oppression? He was aware that, with the police after him, he would not cross the border easily. What difference did that make? He would cross illegally. For a few days he would again become a fugitive, discovering the silence of the forest and, in the wings of history, the eternal childhood of the world. 'With the stride of a free man.' This freedom, postponed for so long, had to come, sooner or later . . .

He arrived at Hirschenberg limp with fatigue, and decided to go to the hotel. He registered under his false name. No one seemed to recognize him. As soon as he was through dinner, he went straight up to his room and slept until late the next morning. When he woke, he saw, beyond the houses around the little square, the clouds still clinging to the tops of the wooded hills. He cursed this dismal day, in which, he could tell already, the steps of a lone wanderer, along any stony path, would resound as though on a pier. He cursed this unnatural light, in which the fog slips down and covers the hills, a damp chill pierces the bone and the smallest field seems to go on for ever.

He looked at the weather as though he were going to

have to live outdoors, far from any town, for the rest of his life. He looked at the sky, and the faint horizon, like a man who is about to leave for the wide open spaces, to find solitude, the risks of the navigator, or the misfortunes of a vagabond, a future of sails, violent winds, walking in the rain, trees passing by, nights coming to meet him. And he wondered at this instinct, this feeling of foreboding. Why? Wasn't there the heated hotel, awaiting him this very evening, trains brightly lit at night, creature comforts, buses to carry him through the splashing puddles, as he dozed, a hospitable inn at every crossroad? Why should he feel this fatigue, this nakedness?

In the middle of the square, on top of the fountain, stood the little bronze statue which he knew so well. It was there, on a summer day, that Paul had spoken to Fritz for the last time. If Fritz were still alive, he should find him. Fritz alone, who was still bound, in spite of everything, to his spiritual calling, and alerted to the signs which came to him in his semi-madness, could tell Paul what had happened on the stud farm since he had disappeared. But feeling a need to rest, Paul lingered in his room. The sky remained overcast. 'In three days I will be back in France.' Paul repeated this to himself, trying to feel joy, or courage. In vain.

In the afternoon, he set out and inquired where to find Mathias Verneiss, the shoemaker. He remembered that Fritz had said he lived there, the last time they met. He found a little workshop in a back alley. The shoemaker was an old man, thin and very near-sighted. His white hair was cut short and his face wore an expression of hostility.

'Are you from the town hall?' he asked Paul.

Paul shook his head.

'He's been waiting for a certificate of his age, so that

he can go to the asylum,' the shoemaker said with bitterness. 'Of course, if he knew anyone down there . . . He's at the end of his tether, not even in his right mind. Just putters about here and there . . . He's out but he'll be back soon. If you feel like waiting . . .'

• He went back to work. Paul sat down on an old chair.

'Why do you want to see him?' the shoemaker asked Paul, after a moment or so.

Paul said that he knew Fritz, and that since he was passing through Hirschenberg, he thought he would stop and say hello.

'Nonsense,' muttered the shoemaker. 'I don't believe you.'

Paul protested; it was the most natural thing in the world. . . . The shoemaker shook his head; he had nails between his teeth. He kept on showing his disbelief in this way until he had taken the nails, one by one, and pounded them into the shoe which sat on the form in front of him.

'That would mean you were a friend of Fritz,' he said finally, with a snicker. 'Quite impossible. A man who says anything that comes into his head, who talks as though he were in the pulpit. More and more senile every day. And disagreeable, on top of it. I keep him here in the attic because I don't know how to get rid of him. Most of the time I even feed him. He sits there, just like that. I put a plate in front of him. He's lucky that I'm a bachelor. Even so . . . The other evening, for instance, it wasn't that I had been drinking; I hardly drink at all. We'd finished supper. I let him talk. He usually goes up to bed before I do. I stay down here to sort out the leather. He came back down, I don't know why, just as I was about to go to bed. We met on the stairs. I lost my temper. I pushed him against the wall and held him there, without

saying anything, for a long time. I could have killed him. . . . He didn't say anything either. He was puffing like a walrus. Then I let him go. I left him. The poor beggar.'

Mathias Verneiss drove a few more nails into the shoe and then, turning around, he took one of those sticks of hard, black wax used by men of his trade, the smell of which Paul remembered liking in his childhood. Mathias started to light a little zinc kerosene lamp. . . . No. He laid down the wax.

'The great question!' he exclaimed, throwing up his arms in a deliberately histrionic manner. 'Why are we on this earth?' He forced himself to laugh. 'No one has ever asked that before, have they? Well, that's Fritz. You're in the middle of eating your soup and he comes out with something like that. So don't tell me you enjoy it, or that Fritz is a friend of yours! Where did you come from?'

'Berlin.'

'Berlin, a scourged city. Peace, but the peace that grows in the rubble. Not the true peace . . .' said the shoemaker, as though reciting something. He spoke the way Fritz did, two years ago. 'And you came all the way from Berlin to see Fritz, an old, half-demented tramp? I still don't believe you!'

'I didn't make a special trip! I was passing through, that's all!' protested Paul, who was beginning to feel uneasy.

'No need to get upset,' replied the shoemaker. 'I'm not a policeman. It's your business. Do what you like, why should it concern me? . . . Where did you buy your shoes?'

'Back there.'

'A piece of flimsy rubber between two thin leather

soles. Rotten, like everything else they make these days. You won't get far in those.'

'Well then, I'll buy another pair!' said Paul, losing patience.

'So we're rich, are we?' replied the shoemaker. 'Of course in Berlin, in the big city, money must flow like water, even if the houses haven't been put back together yet. . . . Look, here comes our lunatic. I can see him down the street.'

Paul turned towards the glass door. Fritz was approaching. 'He'll be surprised,' thought Paul. 'He must have heard about my accident.' Paul was sorry that their meeting had to take place in the presence of the shoemaker, but it was too late for him to go out to meet Fritz. The former steward was already pushing on the door. His hair was now pure white and gave him a dignified appearance which stood out in contrast to his shabby clothes. Seeing Paul he stood transfixed on the threshold and forgot to close the door behind him.

'My God!'

The shoemaker yelled at him to close the door, and, tearing himself from his astonishment, Fritz obeyed promptly.

'I was passing through,' said Paul. 'I wanted to see what had become of you. I'll explain about the accident . . .'

Fritz stared at him and said nothing. The shoemaker seemed impressed by the way his lodger was greeting the visitor. He had stopped working.

'So you've come back,' Fritz said finally, in a slow voice.

'Just for a few hours . . . I suppose everyone thought I was dead. Well, as you can see . . .'

'Yes, I do see . . .' Fritz nodded and sat down on the chair where Paul had been sitting. He raised his eyes towards Paul. 'How pale you look!'

‘The strain of travelling,’ said Paul. ‘What is happening up there on the stud farm?’

‘You don’t know? Well, not much. They have a new servant, whom I know. I talk with him whenever we meet on market days. Not much. Wittgenstein has been back for a long time. Nearly eighteen months, if I remember correctly.’

‘Yes, I was still there.’

‘Oh, you were? When did you die, then? I forget.’

Paul tried to laugh. Such a comic way of wording the question! In answering, however, he yielded to the desire to explain things correctly.

‘It’s been almost a year now since people thought I was dead.’

‘A year . . .’ Fritz, who still seemed stunned, was thinking. ‘No, nothing much has happened in the last year. Everyone is sad.’

‘Who is sad?’

‘She is; I am; everyone you used to know. I met her; it must be about three months ago. She had changed a lot. Apparently old Wittgenstein has been drinking more and more. He neglects everything. Another one who can’t get over the war . . .’ Fritz stopped short. ‘Listen, Paul. You frighten me. Go away! Go away, I beg you!’

‘But what’s come over you?’ cried Paul. ‘I came to have a quiet talk with you . . .’

‘That’s right, the man is being very nice to you!’ said the shoemaker, angrily. ‘And you start in with all your crazy ideas! “When did you die?” Some day I’ll hit you, Fritz. That’s what you deserve!’

Fritz turned to Paul:

‘Forgive me,’ he said humbly. ‘What else did you want to know?’

‘Did Lena marry again?’

'No, I would have heard; even though I don't see her very much. She is still in mourning.'

At these words, Paul felt a violent anguish. Everything ends up as mourning. Death swallows up everything and turns it into a travesty. Its cult is greater than we are and overwhelms us. We think we deserve to be forgotten, and the world remembers. Then a new life begins for us; our tombs are like boats cut off from their moorings. Whatever had stood between Paul and Lena no longer existed, was denied. No trace of the coldness that had entered into their relationship; no memory of the arguments, the cruel, destructive words that had been spoken. Nothing but a dead husband, a pillar of stone, no longer a problem, but a faithful memorial to keep grief alive.

Paul might perhaps have anticipated this perfect rôle, retired into himself, and, instead of the impossible love he sought, contented himself with the thought of all the regrets that his death would inspire. These regrets were present, fully developed, in the dull routine of everyday life, in the feelings of indifference, like the black grain whose husks are swollen in the sterility of summer, with seed full of wintry promise. This thought became excruciating. 'So she loved me in spite of everything?' But what did that mean? Was there any truth behind it?

Truth! What kind of a demon had possessed Paul? Where was this absurd striving leading him, this striving for pure meaning, for the most rarified symbols, for the transcendent understanding that would satisfy pride? For pride had been everything. Paul discovered that, through pride, out of longing for a faraway truth that he alone could appreciate, he had rejected everyone: Lena, Maria, Skyrne, and maybe even others whom he had not even taken the trouble to notice. Of course all these

individuals had brought their own heavy burden of troubles, and he would have had to share it. Each had his own character, set, once and for all, and Paul would have had to enter into a different way of seeing things, to accept and love someone else's past, and whatever lay hidden in it. But wasn't that the only possible destiny? All this came to him in a flash of insight and he suddenly felt desperately ashamed of himself. His make-believe death seemed loathsome to him.

'Yes, I shouldn't have . . .' he murmured. 'But life with Wittgenstein was becoming intolerable. You know him . . .'

'If you say that, it's because you did it deliberately.'

'No, not deliberately. It happened. An accident. I took advantage of it. I wanted to find out . . .'

'I am trying to believe you,' said Fritz, rising with effort. 'I know you are not dead since you are here in front of me, and Mathias sees you and hears you as I do. But still, there's something. Something in your eyes. Something that frightens me.'

'I am very tired, that's all,' Paul said again.

He was not lying. He suddenly felt overcome with fatigue. He thought he was coming down with an illness.

'You idiot! Can't you see he's just tired!' Mathias cried out to Fritz. 'You're always looking for hidden meanings . . . Sit down, why don't you!' he said to Paul, with the same gruffness.

Paul obeyed. Never had he felt in such a strange state of mind; a kind of bottomless despair and extreme weariness. He said nothing. There was nothing more to ask. He had been told everything he needed to know about the stud farm. The two men were watching him, intently.

'It's not easy to go all the way,' said Fritz.

'All the way? Perhaps that's an exaggeration.' Paul tried to smile, but was not able to. 'In any case, I came back.'

'A strange way of coming back. I have the feeling that you're not really here. Just to look at you: you're not the same . . . No, you haven't really come back, Paul. No one ever comes back from where you were.'

'But where on earth was he?' shouted Mathias, so violently that Paul gave a start, weary as he was. 'Where was he? In Berlin, that's where he was! He just told me. And you go ranting on and on, as usual . . .'

'That's right. I was in Berlin,' said Paul, but it was as though no one heard him.

The shoemaker had risen and was nervously rummaging through the knives, tools, and boxes of nails that lay in front of him. His hands were trembling. Mathias' anger and apprehension surprised Paul. He seemed to be in a genuine panic. What did all this mean?

'And you, as usual, you don't understand at all,' replied Fritz, with sudden conviction. 'You start to shout, every time you notice that there is something going on outside of your own little life. Shouting, that's all you know how to do!'

'My little life! to hear that from a beggar, a flea-bitten pauper who thinks he's a prophet. Watch out, Fritz!' cried the shoemaker, brandishing one of his knives. 'One day I'll leave a mark on you, I'll kill you! And I assure you after that you won't want to come back!'

Clearly worn out by this fit of anger, he sat down at his bench and prepared to go back to work.

'I'm going,' said Paul.

The two others, apparently not anxious to keep him there, said nothing. Paul, however, hesitated before

getting up from his chair. He felt comfortable in this little workshop, in spite of the violent words which had just been spoken. It was getting dark. Mathias had lit a lamp which shone on his veined hands, the tarnished steel tools, the leather trimmings like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the nails gleaming in their cast-iron cups. It was hot. A bitter smell, rising from the sticks of black wax on the bench, or a bit of pitch hidden somewhere, was filling the room, a smell which revived a distant memory of childhood in Paul's mind.

He sometimes used to visit a neighbouring cobbler, a club-footed man. The man blackened the leather of the resoled shoes with wax and spoke to the child in a deep voice. At the back of the narrow workshop, deep in shadow like this one, on the floor and on shelves, were rows and rows of shoes, worn at the heel or cracked, some upside down with a chalk mark on the sole. Dozens upon dozens of Parisian pedestrians, their haste, their fatigue, their ineffectual attempts at elegance, were revealed in the thin leather, the pointed vamps, or for the women, the high heels which in those days were still spool-shaped. Child as he was, Paul sensed in this workshop the frenzied pace of the big city, its feet trampling endlessly in the rain. The headlights of cars passed in the street. Steps resounded, on the other side of the dusty shop window where the cobbler's name was painted in dark letters. The workshop, warmed by a little stove and penetrated with an odour of wax and pitch became a sort of refuge in the midst of Parisian life, and when a customer opened the door the whole exhilarating nocturnal roar flowed in upon you . . .

'I am going back to France,' said Paul, who was still lingering before getting up from his chair.

Fritz stood beside him and was looking at him. At

least Paul imagined that he was, for he did not feel the need to raise his head. It would have been a great effort, and besides, from now on, merely to glance at anyone meant having to start all over again with them. He did not want to start over again. He was saying 'I am going back to France,' for his own sake, to comfort himself, to find the strength to overcome this strange exhaustion.

'You are right,' said Fritz. 'You need to rest now. And you can't really rest anywhere but in your own country. Even though ever since the war I have said there are no more countries, there is still the soil, your own soil . . .'

'Fritz, my poor fellow, you'll never change!' said Paul, getting up reluctantly, at last. 'The same peculiar ideas, the same little private religion. From what you say, I might as well be buried already. But you're a good soul. That's what counts. I hope we'll see each other again.'

'Of course, we'll see each other,' replied Fritz, with a kind of wild, contorted expression on his face.

'You must have time on your hands,' Mathias muttered to Paul.

'If you see Lena, don't say a word,' Paul went on, without acknowledging the shoemaker's remark. 'There's no point in telling her. . . . Don't say anything to anyone, just as though I never came back.'

Fritz, still wild-eyed, nodded in agreement.

'All right, you never came back . . . No, you never came back . . .'

He sat down and remained there, staring at the ground. Once again, Mathias had stopped working. He was looking at Fritz with an air of anxious expectation, like a person who doesn't know what to believe, and is watching for a word or a gesture from someone in whom he will place his entire confidence. His lips were stirring slightly. Paul went to the door.

‘Well then, goodbye.’

He closed the door behind him and saw through the glass that neither Fritz nor Mathias had moved.

Still troubled by the strange emotions which had come over him in the cobbler's shop, Paul made his way back to the hotel. He was going to fasten his suitcases and take the first train west that evening. He had nothing more to do in this town. His fake death, which he could no longer think of without acute suffering, had left a distance between himself and Lena that could never be spanned. How could he be forgiven for anything so atrocious? And after all, perhaps he gave Lena's mourning too sombre an interpretation. A widow in the provinces has certain obligations, a certain position to maintain. And is it not also true that the observance of posthumous fidelity, even at its most rigid, far from discouraging any new suitors, often encourages them in their endeavours? They know that under such circumstances, victory will be savoured to its utmost, and that each obstacle is a guarantee against the oblivion of which they themselves might one day be the victims. True. But did this change anything? Lena's grief, sincere or not, did not erase the shameful quality of Paul's imposture. It would always stand in the way of any feelings between them, of the tenderness which could survive only by remaining in the past. Paul could go on being loved by Lena only on the condition that he never return from beyond the grave. He had trapped himself for ever.

Along with these fairly rational thoughts, Paul also had a vague feeling that he was outside life. He had just been rejected, both by Fritz, in his perpetual state of semi-delirium, and by Mathias, the shoemaker, more instinctively, and less by what he had said than by what he had

not said. He had been thrust against a mental block which prevented the two men from looking upon him as a living human being. He did not appear to them as a ghost; they knew perfectly well that they could touch him, but his appearance was so shrouded in mystery, so overshadowed by his absence, which they had believed to be eternal, that they could not fit him into the ordinary scheme of things. The fact that Paul's disappearance had only been a trick did not matter to them. There was nothing to distinguish it from a real death. The only thing missing had been the corpse. All the other accessories had been ready and available. Mourning included.

It was when Fritz had uttered the word 'mourning' that Paul had begun to have a feeling of suffocation, of weariness. This feeling, similar to the terror which characters in fairy tales feel when they wake up in a sepulchre, had not abated since then. Lena had covered him in a dark, almost palpable shroud, and he could actually smell the crepe, too recently dyed, the ink-like odour of mourning. Could he escape, just as the heroes of fairy tales are finally woken and saved? Could he throw off this oppressive paraphernalia, and flee this nightmare?

France might help him, with its light, the memories of childhood and youth which awaited him and would bring him closer to a secure image of himself. War and what followed had cut him off from his own reality, had plunged him into an alien universe, Germany, whose landscapes, and cold skies, numbed by defeat and devastation, were so conducive to the supernatural. How fleshly, how human France seemed in contrast to this country in which one plummeted, at every step, into the abyss of dreams!

Paul had reached the side of the square opposite the hotel. A car was parked in front of the entrance. When Paul was no more than a few yards from the hotel, a policeman came out and turned back towards the vestibule, as though waiting for someone to follow. Paul stopped. He said to himself that he should walk quietly past the policeman and keep going, leaving the hotel behind him. His hesitation gave him away. Casually looking around, the policeman saw Paul standing there motionless. Unable to control his first impulse, Paul turned on his heels and began to walk away very fast.

‘Just a minute, sir!’ cried the policeman, his curiosity naturally aroused by this odd little performance. ‘Just one minute!’

Paul began to run. He looked behind him without slowing down. The policeman was waving his arms and seemed to be calling to someone inside the hotel. Paul did not think he could get away. Startled, the people along the pavement stepped aside to let him pass. They indicated to his pursuers the direction he had taken. Noticing a deserted alley off to one side, he ran down it as fast as he could until he reached another very busy street, lined with shops; there he slowed down and started walking at a normal pace.

In order to gather his wits and catch his breath, and at the same time to confuse his pursuers, he stepped into a grocery store where a number of people were crowding. He could hide behind them from the police, if they came along the street. Could the one who had called out to him even recognize him? While waiting for an assistant (what would he buy?) he looked at himself in one of the fancy mirrors that decorated the walls. He was pale and some-

what dishevelled: the image of a fugitive. He wore an American raincoat which he had bought in Berlin and which not too many people wore, especially in the provinces where occupation surpluses were not familiar. Get rid of it, as quickly as possible. The grocer's assistant asked Paul what he wanted. He hesitated and decided on a flask of brandy. An unfortunate choice; as he waited on him, the boy looked at Paul several times, inquisitively.

Paul found himself back in the street and began to walk as fast as he could past the lighted shop windows. This commercial district did not extend very far. Soon he was again on a shadowy, deserted street where he could be seen from a long way off, even heard, for his footsteps resounded as they had never resounded before. He had taken off his raincoat and was carrying it over his arm, where it was just as conspicuous, for the evening was cold and damp. Should he throw it out? He needed it. His flight was not over. He had started down a street even emptier than the one he had just left, when he saw a car coming towards him, moving very slowly. The cars he had seen until then had passed too quickly for him to take notice. He hid in a recessed doorway, just one second before the car turned its headlights up high for a moment. It passed a few yards away from Paul. It was the police, just as he suspected. Paul saw polished leather visors gleaming inside. One of the men was smoking, which made Paul somewhat happier. They were casual enough. They would soon get tired of looking for him. But would he get tired first he wondered.

His raincoat bothered him. Carrying it over one arm, he was obliged to keep his elbow sticking out to the side. It made it harder to slip along and, when he flattened himself into a doorway, the arm folded beneath him remained partly visible. If he let the coat hang down, it

dragged along the wet ground. Paul, however, had no desire to throw it away. On the contrary, he held it against him, as though it were his last earthly possession, or as though he sought consolation from it, the way a child clings to certain familiar objects in a dark or lonely room.

When the street seemed deserted again, he came out of hiding and continued walking, but with greater anxiety than before. He felt like taking a few swallows of brandy. He took the flask from his pocket, managed to rip off the heavy foil that sealed the neck, but then discovered, with his fingers, that the cork was inserted level with the glass. He threw the bottle in the gutter. The street came out into a rather wide avenue with rows of street lamps. Paul, who had come to town often and knew it well, could not tell where he was. Perhaps this street was a new one, leading to a recently built part of the town? The same disorientated feeling as in certain dreams, the wintry void, even these rows of lights, accentuated his fears. He felt lost in a labyrinth, a town that was going through transformations, losing even its name, and was leading him along sinister streets to the scene of his undoing.

He leaned back against a tree. The thickness of its trunk revealed that the avenue had been there a long time. He could not remain in town. The hotels, cafés where Paul might have stopped to rest were watched by the police. So was the station, and the main arteries leading in and out of town. He would have to find one of those back streets which cut across the avenues, past gardens, far from any doors, and led to the highway. He remembered the road which he and Lena had once taken on foot, coming from the stud farm. How could he find it again? He started along the avenue. At a crossroads ahead of him a car passed by slowly, its headlights high. Paul

stopped again. The car drove on, made a complete turn and started along the avenue in the opposite direction. Paul followed it, calmed by the thought that he could watch its progress at a distance. But what if there were two, or even three cars searching for him at the same time?

He was worn out. Thirst tortured him more than anything. If only there were a blade of grass to chew on! He walked past the houses. A door opened, throwing a bright rectangle of light into the street. A man came out, and hurriedly threw a bucket of ashes into a dustbin. The wind blew them into Paul's face as he watched quietly. The man went back inside without seeing him. Soon Paul noticed that the avenue was leading out of town. He turned into the first street that cut off to the side, an alley. It led back to the main commercial artery that he had left earlier. The shops were closing. There were fewer and fewer pedestrians, but cars were still about and Paul thought it wise to leap across the open pavement as fast as possible. He decided to keep going straight ahead, cutting across the network of streets to the edge of town. Now everything began to be familiar again. Paul passed the post office, and saw, a little further on, the café where he had once stopped. It was there that the tools had been stolen from the back of the jeep. The road which led to the stud farm began not far from here.

He turned before he reached it, still looking for the road which led past the gardens and up the hill. It did not start in the middle of town, but from a street on the outskirts that was lined with houses. There it was, ahead of him, entirely deserted. Paul started along it, and feeling almost safe, put his raincoat back on. Where did the road to the stud farm begin? Paul walked along briskly, leaving the town behind him. The road, slightly elevated,

was not lit, and he could barely make out the fenced-in lots and cottages which lay below, on either side.

Headlights appeared behind him, so strong that they threw his shadow ahead of him on the pavement. He leapt into the deep ditch by the side of the road, and fell against a wire fence. The car reached the spot where he had been standing. The brakes screeched. Paul jumped over the fence, cutting his thigh and his hands on the barbed wire which was strung along the top of the fence. He ran across an expanse of soft earth. Men's voices rang out from the road. He climbed over another fence, again cutting himself, and kept running. This meadow must be wide, for he grew winded before he reached any new obstacles. He tripped on a clod of earth and fell to his knees.

Behind him, the headlights glared, blinding in spite of the distance. The police had probably turned the car around, in order to light up the fields. Paul got up. They must have started out after him. His hands were sticky and painful. He realized that they must be bleeding. Still running, he took out his handkerchief and gripped it first in one hand and then the other, tightening his fist over the pain and the wounds which he could not see. Soon he found himself in front of another barbed wire fence which hemmed in the meadow on this side. He leaned on one of the posts that supported it and, this time, was able to climb over without hurting himself. Only the edge of his raincoat caught in the wire and tore as Paul moved on.

He started running again, then stopped short; he thought he heard steps pounding ahead of him. No, it was only the echo of his own feet. He started out again and cut off to one side, towards some woods which covered the hill, and which he could make out as a vague black mass in the darkness. The slope made him slow

down. On the inside of his thigh he felt a burning pain which grew sharper each time the cloth of his trousers rubbed against it, even though it was torn. Paul remembered the morning when he had come down the hill with Lena, walking towards the town. The rooftops had gleamed below them, in the sun. He clung now to this image in his mind and kept repeating 'the rooftops gleamed in the sun' again and again, as though, by this desperate incantation, he were able to bring back the reality of that faraway morning. He felt his strength running out and, thinking that his pursuers had abandoned him, he allowed himself to pause from time to time.

Finally he reached the edge of the woods, plunged in beneath the trees and fell on the ground, beneath a low bush. Laying all caution aside, he lit a match; he wanted to see his wounds. Two deep gashes ran along his thigh beneath the rent in his trousers. The blood had run down all the way to his ankle, but the wounds seemed to have dried. The palms of his hands, and his fingers, were black with blood, congealed and mingled with earth, all this burning and swollen. He had to keep going. The police would no doubt organize a hunt. Paul knew that he now had only one last resort: to take refuge on the stud farm. In his condition, a man sought by the police could not appear in a village or take a bus or a train. At the stud farm, Paul would return to the hiding-place he had once occupied. Wittgenstein would not dare betray him. Everything could begin again, everything would begin again. . . . He forced himself to start walking. Yes, • Everything would begin again. He could have shouted these words aloud in the forest, so great was his conviction. What could they hold against him? He had suffered so much, for months and months. Suffered for himself?

No. Suffered for an idea of the world and of mankind for which, in spite of his own mediocrity, he had searched. Suffered so that he could find himself far away, beyond the routine of everyday life, so that he could love better, understand better, give dawn a second chance, and peace, a future. All this, no doubt, in an outburst of pride . . .

As he made his way through the bushes, the brambles scratched his face and he accepted this additional punishment. He would soon reach the stud farm. To arrive there thus torn and bleeding, seemed appropriate to him. He could think of no better form of repentance. But if he could only get there! Rushing on without thinking, he was losing his way. During the time he had been walking, he had probably covered more than the distance which separated Hirschenberg from the stud farm. He reached a road through the forest, but fearing that someone might see him, he ran across it. A steep bank lay on the other side. Paul had to climb on his hands and knees. His feet slipped. He dug his knees and his fingers into the damp earth. The sweat poured from his brow. Once at the top, he lay there for a moment, flat on his stomach in the drenched leaves. Now he was shivering. The wounds on his hands had opened again. He tried to mop them with his blood-stiffened handkerchief. Later, he lit a match and looked at his watch; he had been walking for more than three hours.

He began to despair of ever reaching the stud farm. He kept going, from then on in a kind of daze. The night grew luminous for him. He knew every tree: a beech like no other, bearing great gnarls, coats of arms outlined in blackened sap, crawling with grubs; an oak with its principal roots exposed, symbols of a lifetime of exertion; a pine rising from its own round of dead earth. And even

though he could make his way among them only in confusion, each of these trees was a part of Paul's past: the uprooted oaks of childhood, green acorns, in the shadow of adulthood; the rows of pine trees along every march and counter-march of wartime, an absurd reminder of the faraway joys of youth; beeches, ash trees, birches rising against the glow of a forest fire, though at the moment of the fire they had not been there, though they had existed long before, inconspicuous, banded together, forgotten, and yet forever erect in his memory.

This great past of trees, within him! This great past of land, animals, human beings, this past of rain, of sun on tile roofs, this past of wind and cities! A little bleeding could put it all in jeopardy, destroy it. The pain, the blood, and the death that followed were so many threats to this reality which was forever a part of him. As though the trees had begun to bleed, or the walls of a town. As though the sharp, rusty teeth of the barbed wire could have bitten, savagely, into the oak, into childhood. As though rain could suffer . . .

The trees kept coming, borne in wild confusion by the waters of the night, all the trees, one after the other, trees telling tales, trees with their roots, with branches, even with leaves too high to be seen: a forest of masts, a city of ships heaped one upon the other in the darkness, with man climbing from one deck to another, at anchor in endless silence, until dawn and the open seas.

But dawn did not come. The night grew colder. Hardly conscious as he walked, Paul tripped against the stump of a tree cut down by the woodsmen. He got up again and went his way, limping. He had bruised his knee. He would gladly have thrown himself on the ground and fallen asleep if the pain he felt in his hands, his thigh, and now his knee had not been like spurs goading him on,

towards the place where everything would be miraculously soothed. Even more urgent was his fear. Why was it so great? Would a few months in prison be such a terrible hardship?

But Paul could no longer reason clearly. Everything merged together in his mind and he could no longer distinguish among the various threats which had weighed upon him for two years, separate those which were part of the war and those which were not. The beating of Peter Seiss, his escape from the prison camp, the black market dealings in Nuremberg, his collaboration with the Germans of East Berlin were superimposed one upon the other, were massed together into one original sin, beyond all forgiveness.

Paul had sinned against a static Germany, whose laws defeat had changed only superficially, where the deeds of a former prisoner were judged as a relapse. For two years now he had been an outlaw and his crimes had been accumulating. They had to catch up with him. The police who were pursuing him that night were also those of Harzburg, the town he had fled after having struck the lame man. The last man whom he had passed as he came out of Hirschenberg a few hours earlier, and who had looked at him for a long time, was the same man who had stood in the fields, a cane in his hand, the evening when Paul had run through the furrows dressed as a soldier. Nothing had changed. All of Germany, severe and scornful, was keeping watch for him, was tracking him down. But once again he would escape. He would find the way to the stud farm, the loft, the bed of straw, the window where a rope hung ready, Lena's gentleness and the sound of the restless horses in the night. He now could move only with great pain. His wounds were in flames. He felt a stabbing pain in his groin. One of his hands was

swollen. And on top of this, an excruciating thirst. . . . He began to dream of rain, a heavy rain that would allow him to drink from the puddles and wash his wounds. Several times, he thought he heard the patter of drops on the dead leaves which covered the ground. He threw his head back, in vain, and each time he did this he felt dizzy. Everything above him was black, still, and hopeless. It was as though the dawn would never come.

A long time passed before a road finally opened up ahead of him in the darkness. He stepped into the middle of it, turned his head to one side and then the other, and saw, not far away, the white gate of the stud farm. He almost ran to it; his excitement and emotions were so strong that he forgot his exhaustion and the pain stiffening his leg. The gate was locked. Paul would have to climb over the fence. It was higher than those which he had climbed until then, and more dangerous, too, because the barbed wire was strung like a grille between the posts.

Paul took off his raincoat, wrapped it around his hands and began to climb. The wires gave beneath his weight and swung back and forth. To keep steady, Paul had to lean forward. Before he had climbed four rungs his clothes were in shreds and his legs deeply gashed. The raincoat, rolled into a muff, was soon caught in the little wire prongs and Paul left it there. He now held on with his bare hands, and even though he tried to spread his fingers so as to seize only the smooth stretches of wire, he wounded himself again.

The fence was swaying beneath him. He felt that he was going to let go. He made a last effort, groaning, and reached the top wire. The upper part of his body leaned over the other side. The ends of the barbed wire dug into his belly. If he could stand up as straight as possible and

then jump . . . He dived rather than jumped. His shoulder and his head hit the ground, without hurting him too much, just dazing him for a moment. Nevertheless he rose with great difficulty. He began to feel faint and sick. On his belly, his hands and his legs, the wounds burned. Something was running along his groin and his thighs: blood, he supposed. How could he tell? His fingers were soaked with blood. He started across the meadow, reeling, stumbling over molehills. Soon he could make out in the darkness the deeper shadow of the barn. Saved! Tears came to his eyes, like those of childhood. He no longer asked for anything, he would never ask for anything but a refuge, however obscure; affection, however commonplace; peace, however mediocre and prosaic. As soon as he had been forgotten by the police, he would return to France with Lena. In the end, there was only one country in the world where he could abandon all his struggles.

He passed the large hall and approached the house. A dog leapt at him, barking. Paul thought he recognized him and called out his name. The dog continued to howl. He rushed at Paul, his teeth bared. Paul kicked him. Suddenly silenced, the dog drew back and then began to bark again, keeping his distance. Paul ran, followed by the dog, and found himself next to the house. He heard the sound of a window being thrown open, he couldn't tell where, because of the darkness, the tears which dimmed his sight, the dizziness which was coming over him.

'Lena; . . . It's Paul!' he cried.

He heard someone moving above his head. Why didn't anyone turn the lights on, why did no one answer?

'It's me, Paul!'

He repeated his name again, more faintly this time, without thinking and then, sensing a threat, he drew

back two steps. A shot flashed in the darkness. Paul fell on the ground, face down. He fell too soon to see that, on the floor where Lena lived, a light finally shone in the window.

